

The
Last Sentence

William F. Foster

- 1893 -



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THE LAST SENTENCE

A NOVEL

BY

MAXWELL GRAY

AUTHOR OF

'THE SILENCE OF DEAN MAITLAND'

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.



LONDON

WILLIAM HEINEMANN

1893

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THE LAST SENTENCE

PART II.—Continued.

CHAPTER III.

COTTESLOE GRANGE.

CYNTHIA waited for the confession interrupted in the moonlight on Swanbourne Down ; but she waited in vain. It seemed as if there could be no greater pain than this, to be stabbed to the heart, humiliated to the dust, by that hand. This man knew what she felt for him ; he drew her secret from her before all her world, and then left her. But let no one suppose that she, Cynthia Brande, was going to peak and pine, and let anything feed upon *her*

damask cheek because a man had been false and cruel. Most of them were false and cruel; at least, according to ballads and old plain songs. It was a pity she had not been able to care for George Copley. Poor fellow, *he* would never have done this thing! So she made a brave outward show—especially at Cottesloe.

The Marlowes could not understand her. ‘Why, the girl is as gay as a lark!’ the General said; ‘she kept me laughing for a good hour yesterday. She refused poor old Cecil that night, I’ll wager what you like. She knows very well that he’ll come on again more in love than ever after a good slice of humble-pie. That girl has far too much spirit to surrender at the first summons. Perhaps Cess isn’t such a fool as he looks, and is lying still, trying to starve the garrison into capitulation.’ But the mother knew better.

Cynthia suffered inwardly, as strong, proud natures do. It must be confessed

that, in the recklessness and disgust that fell upon her, she flirted with poor George Copley until he made her an offer in the full hope of being accepted. Then she saw the error of her ways and wept bitterly in the dead of night, half minded to accept him out of compassion, remorse and desperation.

In mid-October she received a letter, bearing the Marlowe crest,* in a handwriting that made her tremble and pause before she opened it in secure solitude.

‘DEAR MISS BRANDE’ (it began),

‘I fear that my conduct must have seemed strange to you.’ (‘Not in the least, my dear Mr. Marlowe,’ she said to herself; ‘don’t flatter yourself that *I* care one pin for your conduct.’) ‘You must have thought me remiss in not finishing the confession I began so

* Three cats chantant *azure* on a field or formed the shield, the crest being an arm *gules* brandishing a besom *argent*.

tardily when your brother interrupted me.' ('Not I,' she commented; 'what are your confessions to me?') 'I need not tell you what you must have perceived every time we met, that since first I saw you on the down that May day, I loved you.' ('H'm, well, perhaps not; but what are your love affairs to me, monsieur?') 'I tried to conquer my feelings—for I dared not speak; partly for my brother's sake, but chiefly because of what I tried to confess on the down that night; namely, that I had no right to make any proposals to you. I had, in fact, incurred a heavy debt most foolishly and unwarrantably, since I was quite unable to meet it. I should have told you this long before, had I been sure that you would care for me in the way I wished; I have told no one else. That debt is now, by a singular accident, taken away. I am at last a free man, and able honourably to pay my addresses to you. Dearest Miss Brande, I know well that I am no

match for you, my only claim is that I love you—love you with all my heart and soul. And I have sometimes thought, especially of late, that you cared a little for me—more, I mean, than the pleasant friendship you granted me required. That friendship is the charm of my life, but I want more if you can give it me. May I come in late November or early December, and try my fate in person?’

Why had he not made his confession at once? Why did he not come at once? The letter did not ring true; it was stiff and awkward, and he so ready with his pen. Cynthia was very far from divining that the business of ascertaining the facts of his wife and child’s deaths and visiting their new-made grave detained him, or that the piteousness of their fate, together with his consciousness of the great relief it afforded him, made him shrink, far more than feelings of common decency would have done, from so soon

taking advantage of it. He would have liked to give his wife and child their due season of mourning, or, failing that, to have got over the first horror of it before forming new ties. He could not endure the thought of seeing Cynthia yet for some time ; to think of her was an insult to the dead. For our deepest tenderness is usually given to the dead, who need it and care for it no more.

Cynthia replied to this effusion in a most civil little note, saying that they would be delighted to see him at Melton at either time he named, according as it suited his convenience, if he was still minded to come (this underlined), and she remained, etc. Then followed a postscript. She regretted that she would be spending the time mentioned in Yorkshire, and would thus miss the pleasure of seeing him.

This evoked a much warmer letter, expressive of dismay and perplexity. How could he plead his cause personally,

she being absent? Could she mean a final refusal, etc.? Cynthia smiled when she read this, feeling that he was clearly reduced to a becoming state of misery and distraction. This condition was far too wholesome for his soul to be at once even partially relieved. It would do him good to keep him some days in doubt, before answering to the effect that he could not reasonably object to deferring their meeting, since he had so plainly betrayed his convictions that a woman's feelings would keep, like well-made jam, for any length of time. Having waited one month in this confident state of mind, why not wait three or four? Her plans were unsettled; she might go on a round of visits till February, when, *if he were still in the same mind*, they might meet. She did not know what her own mental condition might be by that time; she was a creature of circumstance, malleable, very different from well-boiled jam.

A telegram, 'May I come at once?'

followed, and was leisurely answered. She could not think of putting him to the inconvenience of travelling so far, while *so very much engaged* as he had said. She was, further, very much occupied herself just then. Besides, for such a trifle, such a mere episode in a man's life, etc., it was a pity to upset serious business arrangements. She rightly considered that this would fully convince him of the error of his ways ; she held it immoral not to do so.

Her words went straight home, and Cecil, torn and tossed between respect for the dead and desire for the living, took the earliest possible chance of flying from a distant assize town to the North for part of a Sunday in the middle of November.

On arriving in Westmorland he was to have been received with great hauteur, but at first sight of him, worn, haggard, harassed, and with a sprinkling of those fugitive gray hairs trouble and sickness bring in youth, all poor dear Cynthia's

dignified reserve vanished and the fortress was at once surrendered unconditionally. Had he been ill? she asked in the brief hour they spent together.

‘Pray don’t refer to it,’ he had answered. ‘One doesn’t care to confess to that kind of thing. Besides, if it were known at home, it would be a greater nuisance than you can imagine.’

Poor fellow! so that explained his delay. Singular male creatures, who own to sins but not to sickness, and break people’s hearts rather than their own whimsical reticence!

Cecil was now more than glad that he had never spoken of his marriage. But even in the first flush of happiness, after that brief but satisfactory hour snatched out of a couple of days’ travel to Windermere and back, the dead were not forgotten. After all, this early and probably painless death was probably the happiest thing for Renée, who could never in any real sense have been his wife. She would

now always be a sweet and pathetic figure in memory, hallowed by that tender pity which feeds a gentle melancholy not without charm.

Some remorse touched him in his great happiness after the wintry walk by Lake Windermere, where the dry rustle of sedge in the frost-wind and the cry of a solitary crane made sweet music, and the red sunset, burning behind Langdale Pikes in its first snow-scarf, was like an altar flame. Could he ever forget Cynthia's face in the crimson glow, or her voice in the wood by the rocky waterfall? But then that other young face hidden in the foreign grave, how warm that cold heart had been to him! Well, the piteousness of Renée's fate could not cancel obligations, however unlawfully undertaken, towards another.

Yet in those autumn and winter months Renée's face was always rising, unbidden, reproachful, in moments of social enjoyment, outlined on books and manuscript,

among the motley crowds in streets and theatres, painted on the blackness of wakeful nights. Sometimes in stifling court-houses, amidst the sordid or ghastly details of crime, a burning church would spring up and blot out the faces—stolid, cunning, criminal, guiltless, severe, or serene—and, above the usual sounds of the court, he would hear cries of panic, shouts for succour, prayers, imprecations, the roar of flame, the crash of falling timber and masonry, and above and through all, the quickly stifled shriek of a little child. Then and long after a child's cry unnerved him.

The Marlowes usually spent Christmas at Cottesloe Grange, where General Marlowe always preferred to be since his retirement, and whence from time to time he was dragged to town, or on those various tours that his wife loved to make, not without much good-tempered growling on his part and equally good-tempered scolding on that of Lady Susan, who

vainly tried to convince him that, his *vis inertia* once overcome by forces she impressed upon it, he enjoyed change as well as anybody.

‘ You would not like to degenerate into a cabbage, as you certainly will if you continue to vegetate here,’ she would say.

‘ I know that the commanding officer must be obeyed,’ he would reply with resignation.

‘ And so,’ Lady Susan would comment, ‘ we manage to disagree in the most delightful manner.’

The scene of their chief disagreements was a charming place. Of moderate size, with a steep roof of dark purply-brown tiles, with gables and all sorts of unexpected windows and doors, like casual architectural notes jotted down at odd moments, parcel-clad with ivy, which it wore like a warm robe to protect it from wintry storms, and covered in every sunny aspect with things that love the sun—roses, myrtles, honeysuckles—Cottesloe

Grange was both homelike and dignified. It was built on uneven ground on a hill-side ; hence terraces buttressed by sunny walls, over which various pleasant things grew, charming flights of steps leading to delightful surprises, such as garden-plots, little sheltered nooks with pretty peeps of landscape ; flowers everywhere. Elsewhere, walks between close-shaven yew walls led into tiny paradises of flower, fruit, and greenery ; upon the declivity behind and above the house was a group of Scotch firs, a trap to catch and store the music of the winds and send it forth from time to time in melodious murmurs, seldom quite hushed.

On one of these sheltered terraces Cynthia Brande was strolling on a frosty sunny afternoon just before Christmas. Thence she could see in the blue winter distance her own Swanbourne woods, warm brown in sunshine, and the majestic gray down, its outlines softened by blue air, walling it from the sea. It was on

that down, amid the beauty and bloom of the pleasant May-time, that she had first seen him.

To-day her lips quivered with exceeding happiness, her eyes deepened, her cheek bloomed : she moved, as if instinct with vital joy. Why had this unutterable happiness been given to her ? She had so much, and so many young creatures like herself had so little. It was impossible to share happiness like this, yet it seemed wrong to keep it to one's self. Mr. Forde-Cusacke had groaned over the demoralization of Swanbourne, where it rained coals and blankets, beef and tea, that Christmas, though Cynthia could not make it rain sweethearts. She thought of some people who had been left out, and added a magic-lantern to the village children's Christmas-tree. How perfect this life would be but for those *others* who must always suffer—the poor who are always with us ! She could and did pray that something might be taken

from her lot and added to that of those others. Perhaps lots were not quite so unequal, after all. Such an idyll might come into the lives of the poorest—who could tell?—for Heaven is kind. So she mused, and musing, took out a paper and read it, though she knew it already by heart :

TO CYNTHIA.

‘ That I so love thee, not those sunny eyes,
Deep springs of pure warm light, whose cordial glow
Such tenderness, such delicate mirth do show,
Not the bright face, enkindling with the rise
Of swift and sparkling thought, and warm with dyes
Of health and youth, the wild-rose lips, whence low
Rich laughter ripples in such golden flow,
Are cause ; far deeper is the charm I prize ;
Yea, though thy mellow voice is sweeter far
Than any song-sound, or the deep soft roll
Of moon-lit seas, though all thy motions are
As rhymed responses to the mind’s control,
Though thought and fancy make thy face a star,
I love thee dearest for thy lovely soul.’

Shakespeare *may* have written finer sonnets, and so even may Petrarch, but never any more appreciated by at least one person. What did Laura think of her lover’s superb love-sonnets? Did

she glow and quiver like this girl when reading them? Laura, long since turned to dust, yet made immortal by a love that could never have earthly fruition. Did she, too, wonder at the unsuspected beauties her poet's love discovered in her?

When Cynthia read of the 'lovely soul,' she began to think of her sins and blush for her iniquities. How sadly unworthy she was of this high-souled lover and gifted man! Yet it was comforting to remember that she was still young enough to mend her ways; she must set about that at once.

At this point her musings were broken off short by a quick rustling through the evergreens above, and she looked up to see Lady Susan descending the steps from the upper terrace.

'Dear Cynthia, I have kept you waiting,' she said; 'but there is still ample time. He will not be here before five.'

'If then,' Cynthia returned, as they

quickly descended from terrace to terrace till they reached the drive, which wound round the steep hillside and ended near a frozen lake, shielded from the entrance-gate by fir-trees; 'he thought that he might be detained till to-morrow.'

Lady Susan laughed.

'He *might*, and the sky might come tumbling down,' she replied. 'My dear, I may as well confess on the chance of forgiveness. *I meant it from the first*. I schemed and planned for it. I am a managing mamma. I set my wicked worldly heart upon catching you. And I'm not a bit penitent.'

'Then you can't expect to be forgiven, Cynthia replied with affectionate amusement. 'There is no poetic justice to be had in this world of prose.'

'And the General is just as bad. Though he wanted you for Dick. But, as I told him from the first, *that* would never have done.'

'The General is a darling. So is Dick,

and he is wise enough to see now that I should have plagued him to death as a wife, while I may make a passable sister-in-law. Dear Lady Susan, can a woman pay another a higher compliment than to choose her for her son's wife? And such a son !'

'Oh, I repent it already; you are pinching my arm so hard. But truly, dear Cynthia,' she added, 'this is great promotion for Cecil. There is no profession in which wealth and standing are of more help than his.'

'But I thought chief justices had such princely incomes. I have so often been told by my dear papa that their high salaries—no, I mean emoluments; I love that word: it is so vague, and suggests such Arabian palaces of treasure, it has such an unctuous roll, too—are among the innumerable causes of our immeasurable—another big one—*immeasurable* superiority to every nation on earth. Nobody, you see, is rich enough to bribe even ordinary

judges, except one or two rich bankers, and they are too stingy.'

'But, my dear, Cecil may never be an ordinary judge.'

'How can he? He is not an ordinary barrister, to begin with, I am told, and certainly no ordinary poet. And I have it on the best authority that no child of one year ever manifested so extraordinary a talent——'

'Cynthia! You are past praying for, with those demure airs.'

'Dear, I am so happy that I can scarcely help crying,' Cynthia replied, her face radiant with smiles.

'I did cry when I first heard it, Cynthia. I wonder why we poor women are such geese? The General didn't cry, though he was quite as glad.'

'What *did* he do?' asked Cynthia, with sudden interest.

'Well, he used—*words*—such as "our armies used in Flanders"—his only failing, poor dear! You see, he was shaving at

the time, and I rushed heedlessly into his dressing-room and the razor slipped.'

The cottagers these ladies visited on this afternoon had scarcely time to air more than half a grievance apiece before their guests vanished, and the commissions to be executed in the village were shamefully hurried over, and yet, on their return to the Grange, Cynthia lagged behind, calling attention to all sorts of things, deeply interested in the flight of birds, the rising of flocks of plovers, the fluttering of fieldfares from the hedges, and admiring the deep-red, frosty sunset, till her companion's patience gave way.

But, after all, they might have lingered to see the stars come out, because when they reached home no one had arrived, or could arrive, that night. Lady Susan did not conceal her disappointment, but expressed a hope that a cup of tea such as her son Harry's wife was famed for making might console her. Harry Marlowe being at sea, his wife and child were at the

Grange for Christmas; the two eldest Forde-Cusackes, in whose school measles had broken out, could not go home till they had been through quarantine, so they were undergoing it at Cottesloe. The boys had just returned from an afternoon's wild-duck shooting with Dick Marlowe, very happy and proud, Hugh having fired a gun for the first time in his life and almost shot a duck, he told his sister.

‘He couldn’t quite,’ Dick explained to Cynthia, ‘because his cartridge was blank.’

Dick did not go to India, after all. One of those unconsidered trifles of wars perpetually being waged on British frontiers all over the world happened to break out at the time, and his regiment happened to be sent to the front. So he went to the war and returned with a wound, a medal, a mahogany-coloured face, and a halo of glory, having succeeded far better than the knight of Toggenburg in hunting for peace in the heart of war. ‘Next to

marriage,' he confided to a subaltern afflicted with a similar malady, 'there's nothing like active service for curing a fellow of love.'

After tea the king of the house—the baby—was, as his uncle bitterly remarked, handed round as if he were some sort of refreshment, in a clean white frock, freshly brushed curls, and blue sash, capriciously bestowing favours on his courtiers. Everyone's energies were devoted to amusing the little prince. The General was an ogre in his armchair; 'Untle Dit,' in a table-cover, a richly caparisoned charger, ridden by the young knight; Marmaduke and Hugh, grizzly bears guarding the ogre's castle; the ladies played their proper parts of admiring male prowess. There was only one grave face—that of three-year-old Harry—in the firelit room. Cynthia, sitting in the partial radiance of the one shaded lamp, was thinking that Cecil might take the midnight train and arrive next morning,

when, above the children's cries and laughter, she heard a sound at which her heart began to beat and her eyes became all light. Her lips quivered, but she set them firm, and by the time the door was thrown open and 'Mr. Cecil Marlowe' announced she was the only calm and unstartled person in the room.

She had not seen him since that frosty afternoon at Windermere, and was surprised at the change in him. The worn and harassed look had left him, his dark and rather deep-set eyes glowed, his bearing was erect and free, his features were alight with deeper intellect, and his mouth, which had the beautiful curves of the persuasive speaker, was sweet and firm with restrained gladness.

'By George,' thought his father, 'I had no idea the fellow was so well set up and good-looking ; like his mother.'

'He is, after all, a fine, almost a handsome man,' his mother thought ; 'he gets that *air noble* from his father.'

‘Oh, I say!’ complained Hugh in a loud stage whisper, to the great comfort and delectation of his sister, after Cecil had been duly welcomed by the family, ‘I always thought sweethearts kissed one another, especially at Christmas time.’

‘But whence did you spring, Cess?’ his mother asked; ‘we had given you up for to-night.’

‘I sprang from the train in the midst of Ditwell Marsh, where the engine went off the line; thence I walked across country. No one hurt except a man with a wooden leg. That broke.’

‘Yet wooden members are not always so easily displaced,’ his mother commented; ‘would that ours had been in the train!’

‘He so seldom is in train,’ Cynthia sighed.

‘Bless my soul!’ exclaimed the bewildered General, ‘there is no lack of legs in this house that I know of, though I should have lost mine at Scutari if I hadn’t set my foot pretty firmly down.’

‘So wise of you, Hugh ; that must have fully convinced the doctors the leg was worth saving.’

‘It proved the strength of your understanding, sir,’ added Dick.

There could scarcely have been a gayer or comelier family group than this gathered in the glow of the Christmas hearth, every face full of sunshine and mirth, old and young alike children together. Yet clouds must sooner or later form in the clearest sky, and the first to arise here was on Cecil’s face. It came when little Harry, disgusted at being no longer the centre of interest, insisted on claiming the new-comer’s notice, leaving ‘Untle Dit’ in the lurch, a cast-off favourite. Cecil took him up resignedly, and submitted with the best grace he could muster to a little hair-pulling and kissing ; after which he set the child down from his knee rather hurriedly, telling him that the Dustman was come, and turned from him to watch the sparkle

of Cynthia's eyes in the lamplight. Then Dick, standing near on the rug, abruptly faced about to the fire and kicked a half-burnt log to the core of it, whereupon the flame leapt up and danced over Cynthia's face and hair and upon the wall behind her, bringing out in vivid colouring the picture of the Corregan, with her startled gaze at advancing fate.

CHAPTER IV.

FACE TO FACE.

THEY were again grouped about the fire, or rather fires, since the drawing-room consisted of a succession of rooms, two of which were now cosily curtained off, warmed and lighted. General Marlowe was finishing a game of chess with Dick ; Lady Susan showing the boys things she had picked up in her travels ; Cynthia, busy with her needle, looking on and suggesting that bedtime was long past ; Cecil, lost in a blissful, restful dream, watching this group ; while from the piano Amy Marlowe's voice filled both rooms with the pure and delicious melody of ' *Voi che Sapete*,' most perfect expression

of the first restlessness and fever of new-born love.

‘Amy, how delightful of you!’ Lady Susan said, looking up when the music ceased. ‘There is no song like it.’

‘How about Clärchen’s “Freudvoll und Leidvoll”?’ Cecil asked, ‘and Gretchen’s “Meine Ruh ist hin”?’

‘But where,’ cried the mother, her attention suddenly diverted — ‘where is my sweet Corregan? What devilment is this? Who has spirited my fairy away?’

‘Checkmate, Dick,’ shouted the General, triumphantly sweeping the pieces into the box.

‘I thought this would be a change,’ replied Cecil carelessly; ‘it is not quite such a daub as the other.’

‘Permit me to know best,’ returned his mother, majestically surveying through her uplifted glasses a water-colour that hung where the Corregan had looked at her fate in the firelight an hour since. ‘The Corregan was the only thing of

yours that betrayed the faintest approach to genius, Cecil.'

'I won't deny the genius, my dear mother; but you must admit a want of finish. These Cornish fishers were meant as a Christmas present. Ingratitude, thy name is Susan Marlowe.'

'For my part,' said the defeated Dick, 'I'm glad the thing is gone. There was a nasty creepiness about that Breton witch. Her eyes followed a fellow about. "My good girl," one thought, "*I* haven't jilted you; you are putting it on the wrong man."'

Cecil turned, leant his arm on the mantelpiece, and looked into the fire. He heard Cynthia's gay little laugh, as she said: 'Why, Dick, one might think you had an evil conscience. Now, I loved the Corregan, and always wanted to champion her against all and sundry.'

'She must return to her place, finished or unfinished, Cecil. I insist upon my rights,' his mother said.

But Cecil thought this return improbable, because he saw the last bit of ash fluttering from the grate where he had burnt the Corregan just before dinner. He was far too finely strung not to feel the desecration of such discussion of his dead wife in his father's house, and he knew that Cynthia when she knew would feel it still more keenly. And she must know one day ; he would have to tell her, though everything within him shrank from the telling.

There was in Cynthia a certain strain that in a lower and more selfish nature would have been jealousy—a strong feeling of the sanctity and eternity of the relations between man and woman, and the consequent impossibility of more than one love in a life. She felt her stepfather's position as a perpetual wrong to her father ; she had shown, in some subtle way, that she disliked those poems concerning Georgie Vivian, and did not love the lady.

In the brief hour that these lovers spent

alone that evening Cecil alluded to those poems, saying that he had never cared for Phyllis. Her friendship pleased his vanity ; her fickleness piqued it.

‘ And when one is very young one builds so much rhyme on such slight foundations.’

‘ Of course,’ Cynthia returned, ‘ no sane person believes what is said in verse. “The lunatic, the lover, and the poet”——’

‘ Ah, but the sonnets are literally true from foundation to summit,’ he continued, yielding himself to the fascination of eyes as magnetic as beautiful, eyes in whose mysterious depths a man’s soul might plunge deeper and still deeper, and yet never fathom them.

Then followed some golden moments of that pure happiness which is tasted by most human beings once, and often only once, in a lifetime. To Cecil it was the last day of unalloyed happiness ; the memory of it in after-times wrung his heart. He remembered for ever the touch

of the soft warm hand held, as his by right, in his own ; the singular calm flow of light from the eyes, with their occasional sparks of glow-worm fire ; the expression of the firm yet tender mouth ; the low, happy laughter ; the voice more musical to him than ‘any song-sound’ ; the flash of the jewels she wore ; even the texture of her gown.

Next day dawned brightly and happily enough in the ruddy, powdery gold of a frosty winter’s morning. The boys were out before breakfast to see how the ice was on the pond, and stormed in, rosy and riotous, to proclaim that it was inches thicker than overnight, and that the light snow with which the country was beautifully powdered had not harmed it and could easily be swept aside.

‘My fences,’ groaned the General ; ‘My plants and shrubs,’ sighed Lady Susan, at the prospect of skaters from miles round, invited and uninvited, invading their domains.

One result of the fine condition of the ice was a large, promiscuous and impromptu luncheon-party, General Marlowe being one of those large-hearted people who cannot endure the most distant acquaintances, much less friends, to depart unfed from his gates. Nor did he confine himself to acquaintances and friends, but walked about the pond, telling people that luncheon would be served at such an hour, and sending servants out with casks of ale and bread and cheese for the general public, who came from immemorial custom from far and near when Cottesloe pond bore. Nor could the worthy man be brought to see that there was more difficulty in feeding these indiscriminate and unexpected multitudes than in giving hunting-breakfasts, fixed days, and even weeks, before, and never, as Lady Susan once bitterly observed, lasting more than twelve hours at a stretch. Nor did he see that hunting-breakfasts do not involve the lighting of numerous lamps on trees, or

the kindling of great fires to roast potatoes and boil coffee for several consecutive nights.

‘No doubt,’ this injured lady complained, ‘the poor are much to be pitied during a hard winter ; but consider what three months’ frost would mean to us. Bankruptcy, indeed ! Fraudulent bankruptcy ! Everybody knows that we can’t afford to feed the whole county for three months at a time.’

The task of entertaining these multitudes fell, therefore, rather heavily upon the people of the house. The family was too much engrossed to notice that, when the afternoon letters came and were handed round the table, Cecil, hastily tearing open a large letter enclosing others, suddenly dropped his packet, and sat with clenched teeth and fixed unseeing eyes, staring straight across the table, his face livid with horror. After a time he drank a tumbler of icy water, and, quietly picking up his letters, placed them unread in his

pocket, and went on carving the huge sirloin before him. But he ate no more, and talked rather vaguely to his next neighbour. On leaving the table he rushed to his room and double-locked the door.

He remained there a full hour before he remembered that his absence would be remarked and discussed, and that Cynthia, who had only skated a few moments in the morning, had promised to try something more complex in the afternoon with his help.

‘Poor Cynthia,’ he sighed—‘poor, poor Cynthia!’ Something in a recent letter of hers had touched him, the anticipation of inevitable future sorrow, pathetic in one so young and happy. Under that influence he had penned this sonnet :

‘Must sorrow cloud the sweetest, sunniest eyes
That ever laughed from gentle lady’s face—
Eyes in whose deeps swift mirth-lights ever chase
Thought-sparkles keen, from whence in sudden wise
Clear waves of tenderness so often rise,

Whence kindness beams with such a modest grace,
Pure orbs, wherein no ill thought findeth place,
Trustful and true—shall sorrow these disguise ?
Oh no ! for often I have seen them swim
In holy tears, nor lose their lovely glow ;
With sweetest pity I have seen them brim
While mellowed sunshine in their depths would flow ;
Wan sorrow, deepen not (thou canst not dim)
The worlds of light those parted eyelids show !

The lines, forgotten since written,
repeated themselves over and over again,
as if there were nothing else to think
of.

At last he took a felt hat with a soft
slouching brim, called up a suitable
expression to his face and walked
tranquilly down to the frozen lake,
whence rose the hum of many skates
scudding over ice, most delightful and
indescribable of sounds. He whistled
softly as he went, and this whistling, the
measured walking and the brisk live
atmosphere, all conspired to banish terrible
emotions and dark thoughts, so that by
the time he reached the bank, on which
many people were standing, there was
nothing unusual in his aspect ; his tardy

appearance only reminded people that he had not been seen on the ice since the forenoon.

Where had he been, then, all the afternoon?

‘Business letters,’ was the natural and cheerful reply. Then he put on his skates, with a view to pushing his mother over the ice in a chair. He soon caught sight of Cynthia, skating fearlessly and well, her furs and jacket cast aside, her slender and supple grace revealed, her bright face aglow with happiness and exercise, and his heart felt as if it would break. She was so unconscious of what was coming.

She caught sight of him and gave him a shy, trustful smile as she sped on her way. With blinded, scorched eyes he bent over his skates, bungling at the straps and half choked by a pain like red-hot wires tightening round the throat. When the skates were on at last, he rushed fiercely up and down alone,

forgetting his promise to teach Cynthia, and his intention of pushing the chair for his mother, until the latter sent somebody to remind him of it.

Cynthia, half piqued by his delay, had skated to the farthest end of the lake, and, being cumbered with the chair before him, it was some time before he could intercept her rapid gyrations.

‘I see that you need no instruction, Cynthia,’ he said cheerily; ‘my promised *rôle* is superfluous. The General ought not to have the letters fetched in the middle of the day. He should at least keep them till the last post is gone.’

‘And encourage people’s laziness,’ his mother objected. ‘As for me, I am far too young not to be delighted with frequent letters.’

‘Oh, these pleasure-pampered London people,’ said Cynthia, with the happy voice so natural at her age, but which cut him like a direct reproach, ‘frowning down all our little innocent joys!’

‘So this is the lady who can’t skate,’ he said with laboured gaiety. ‘Mother, admire the champion skater of Cottesloe Pond. Oh, Cynthia, you are a fair deception!’

‘Indeed she is not,’ Lady Susan replied. ‘I only wish half of us were a quarter as genuine. She shall not be maligned. Come, Cecil, take me round by those firs. Then you shall be free.’

Those firs, black by contrast with the light snow-veil on the ground, stood on a slight rise by the water’s bend, and heightened the Northern character of the animated picture on the ice. The fairy-like thunders of steel-shod feet, humming over the glassy-green bending floor, contributed fitly to the gay symphony made up of shouts and laughter, children’s voices and the manifold staccato notes of conversation; the blended sounds, softened by the faint murmur of the apparently stirless trees, rose pleasantly and carried far in the still and frosty air. Faces of

women and children were rosy bright, men's glowed with dusky crimson, eyes sparkled, lips smiled, laughter had the hearty ring of spontaneous mirth, jests were good-humoured, people smiled at their own disasters and were compensated for their crashes on the ungentle ice by the shouts of mirth they evoked, and friend and foe rushed alike to the succour of the fallen.

People never quarrel on skates, they are too happy ; social distinctions merge in a pleasant haze, and disagreeable and unmannerly people forget themselves into decency and pleasantness under the genial influence of the sport. Calvinists should logically condemn skating on week-days as fiercely as they do on Sundays, because no one while skating can possibly believe in predestined damnation or any such devilries. The swift skater leaves sorrow far behind, and blackest care cannot overtake him when he speeds lightly on winged-Mercury feet over the

shining, swaying ice, breathing the clear, sparkling frost-air, and giving pleasant, wholesome play to all his muscles.

Not only do bad things vanish, but all good and wholesome things quicken and flourish in the keen delight of skating : charity grows warmer, love deeper, passion more ethereal, wit keener, and hope more vivid. This cumbrous weight of flesh is then spiritualized to that degree, one seems to have taken off one's body and be skating in one's soul ; the most prosaic people then feel vague stirrings of romance which they take for good digestion and bodily content ; poets and painters have their grandest inspirations when gliding on the swift steels, pessimists enjoy their groans more than usual, teetotalers are intoxicated into tolerance and tipsy folk into sobriety, and the most dyspeptic Saturday Reviewers are reduced to the grudging conviction that novelists, even when ladies, may perhaps be fellow-creatures.

So that Cecil Marlowe, when at last he joined Cynthia, snatched one delicious hour from imminent evil with her. They flew together over the sonorous ice, now hand over hand, now apart, now crossing in graceful figures, alone or with others, now racing, and now simply gliding on close-pressed feet with the speed of pre-gathered impetus. Their engagement was known, and people looked at them, some with sympathy, others with envious depreciation. An unearthly brilliance was in Cecil's face ; Cynthia was in her best looks ; Richard regarded them with affectionate admiration, and thought it no wonder she should prefer his brother. ' Besides,' this good fellow reflected, ' Will is bound to cut a figure in the world. He was always lucky : I'm not. He has luck and brains together : I've neither.'

A belt of trees concealed the lake from the highroad and from the entrance-gates, passing through which, the visitor came suddenly upon the sheet of ice with

its background of firs, above which rose terraced slopes crowned by the Grange, of warm red-brick, scarfed with greenery, its hospitable chimneys sending blue spires of smoke above the trees to the lucid sky. Cynthia had come to a standstill against the bank nearest the winding carriage-road. There stood also Lady Susan, a cosy mass of furs, with the whole house-party and a small crowd of people gathered round her. Cecil was facing the carriage-road and looking at Cynthia, who was talking gaily; others were looking at her too, but there was that in his glance that is only seen in a lover's. Turning his eyes from her when someone else took up the word, he looked toward the drive, and every drop of blood left his face, which became rigid with horror.

Yet it was no Gorgon, the sight of which thus petrified him, but a young and beautiful woman, with cheeks aglow and eyes brilliant with feeling, their gaze seek-

ing his with joyous recognition mingled with bewilderment. Her rapid and vigorous steps had just turned the corner sheltered by the trees. After a momentary pause of astonishment at the scene suddenly revealed to her, and a keen sweeping glance over the numerous figures moving and standing on the ice, she singled out Cecil with an illuminating flash of pleasure in her face, and instantly moved towards the group in which he stood.

For one brief moment his eyes, charged with an expression that curdled her blood, met hers. Then, with one of the slow and graceful movements of a good skater, he turned completely round, scarcely swerving from the spot on which he stood, so that his back was towards the new-comer instead of his face.

As if in unconscious sympathy with him, Cynthia made a half-turn in the same direction, attracted by the orange-red glow deepening in the frosty sky,

against which Cottlesloe Grange stood blackly massed above its terraces.

‘An ideal English home,’ she thought, not perceiving Cecil’s movement, or dreaming that it was the knell of all things to his wife.

CHAPTER V.

THE DENIAL.

WHEN Renée, on turning the corner, bewildered by the ring and hum of skates and medley of voices rising from behind the small plantation at the entrance-gate, and amazed at the festive picture that met her gaze in the house of the widowed husband whom she imagined to be mourning her untimely death, singled Cecil's face from the crowd, she of course saw Cynthia and understood the expression with which her husband looked upon her. Cynthia's charm and comeliness were like knives in her heart; her sharpened hearing distinguished the clear though low-toned voice through the buzz of many

others round her; she saw the radiance on the lady's sweet face—it comes only once in a life, as daffodils once in the year. Then, when the clear voice ceased, came the awful change in her husband's face, as he turned and met, not that sweet lady's eyes, but her own—his wife's.

Her heart stood still at that awful gaze; surely the world stood still too, and the sun paused in his setting.

But worse than that terrible meeting of eyes followed, if anything could be more terrible—that deliberate turning from her, whereby she seemed blotted out of sight and cast for ever behind him. It cut her off from hope and crushed her heart, which dropped heavy and numb in her breast, and yet filled her with sharp, inextinguishable pain. But pride and bitter resentment at the indignity of his averted face and rudely turned shoulder kept her outwardly calm, though her face, a moment since suffused with the

crimson of joyous recognition, was bloodless and her eyes were wild.

She stood for a moment as if frozen to the ground, dizzy and forlorn ; then the film gathering over her eyes cleared, the nightmare spasm clutched no more at her breath, and she shook off the horror of her husband's action, ascribing it to some delusion, inspired by the Evil One. He could not have recognised her ; she was too loyal herself easily to credit disloyalty in another. Or, if he had recognised her, it may have been only as a spiritual apparition or a sad memory. He might not have received her letters, and so have thought her dead. It is painful to see a *revenant*, even of the beloved. But the lady at his side—the lady who turned when he turned, as if so deeply in sympathy with him that her involuntary movements chimed with his, the lady on whom his eyes rested with such adoring light ! Was that a look for a three-months widower ? Yet there was pity,

almost remorse, in the look—pity for that happy girl?—and she had herself been attracted by the charming face.

More is thought and suffered in eventful moments than in years of tranquillity ; unexpected as brief, these lightning flashes of time turn the tide of destinies and colour whole lives ; they undo the toils and strivings of years and set fresh and wholesome currents flowing, never again to be stopped. They are the touchstones of character, at which all the trappings of convention, all carefully simulated or painfully acquired qualities, fall off, leaving the soul naked to the eye of man as to that of its Maker.

‘ The churl in spirit, though he veil
His want in forms for fashion’s sake,
Will let his coltish spirit break
At seasons through the gilded veil.’

And at such times seemingly commonplace natures sometimes rise to unexpected heroism, for the guardian angel whispers though all the spirits from nether darkness clamour.

Perhaps Cecil did not realize the greatness of the terrible moment in which he turned his face from his child's mother ; perhaps he had lived so long in falsehood that the delicate instinctive perception of duty natural to the just was warped and the gentleman's keen sense of honour blunted ; or it may be that he was too much shaken by the sudden blow just received in the first bloom of happiness, too much torn between love for Cynthia and remorse for the wrong he had done her, to be able fully to grasp the situation. His desire to spare the woman he loved was certainly too strong to admit of consideration for the wife he had never loved.

But this was no time for thought : the blood throbbed in his head ; the roar of the sea sounded in his ears ; he looked blankly at the house on the hill, which showed black against the burning sky ; he was helpless to cope with the cruelty of his position, one far too simple in its

only possible ending for a nature so complex as his. By the mysterious magnetism of strong emotion he felt all that was passing around him—the pallor of his wife's face, the sympathetic anxiety of Cynthia's, the surprise and curiosity of his mother and brothers, the faint rustle of astonishment in the bystanders who had seen the foreigner approach, her face beaming, her hands outstretched. Then he turned again with a face of flint and looked, not at, but past his wife. She knew by this that he had not recognised her. She took courage, and tried to arouse his attention. Slowly, and with the proud, erect bearing he once admired, she advanced towards the people grouped on the bank by the edge of the ice.

‘My husband!’ she cried with sudden passion that could find expression only in the language first, longest and most intimately known, and with gestures, eloquent indeed, but such as no Englishwoman uses off the stage; ‘it is I—your wife! I am

alive, and not dead ! Blessed saints ! what is this ?

He put up his eyeglasses and surveyed her with a calmly neutral air.

‘ A foreigner, evidently,’ he said tranquilly. ‘ Has anybody any idea who she is ? Do *you* know anything of her, Mr. Bickerton ?’

Then, dropping his glasses, he turned with an amiable smile to the man next him, the mildest of young curates, the rosy freshness of whose innocent face was dusked with the merest hint of future whiskers and whose clear eyes were expressive of the most transparent wonder as they rested on Renée’s tragic face.

‘ I ? Oh dear no ! I am a stranger in these parts. I wonder what the poor creature wants ? Can she speak English ? Do you think, Lady Susan, that she is German ?’

‘ What is she, Dick ? — not French, that’s certain,’ the General said at the same time.

‘Never heard the lingo in my life, sir.’

‘Certainly not German—perhaps Hungarian,’ Lady Susan replied, coming forward with the intention of speaking to the foreign woman.

But, when the meaning of her husband’s words reached her incredulous mind, Renée’s head drooped, her arms fell to her sides, she paused with a faint stagger. Then, quickly recovering herself, and saying in a heavy but distinct voice, ‘*Je me suis trompée,*’ she turned and slowly passed into the shadow of the trees, which engulfed her so completely that it seemed as if she herself were but a shadow absorbed into deeper shadows and lost.

It was not thus that Cecil Marlowe’s wife had expected to be received back, like Alcestis, from the grave. Her first thought, on recovering sufficiently from the shock sustained in the burning church, whence she had been conveyed with her unhurt child in her arms, injured,

unconscious, blackened, singed, and with clothing half burnt off, among others to the hospital, was to write to Cecil, who, she knew, had long since heard of her supposed death. But, as both she and the schoolmistress were accustomed to send letters to an address whence he fetched them himself at regular intervals, and as she could not write till the beginning of December, three months after the accident, neither this letter nor its successor received any answer.

The miscarriage of those rare and precarious means of sending tidings, written letters, was but natural to one bred as Renée; the most simple and easy way to her mind of getting news of her husband was to go straight to him. His last remittance, just cashed and sewn into her underclothing, was found upon her and guarded during her long illness. This was spent before she started on her journey. With a little money borrowed from the head of the school, she travelled

at the cheapest rate, guided to Cottesloe by what her husband had told her of his father's house. There she thought to obtain certain tidings of him, for she could not trust the perpetually changing addresses from which he wrote while on circuit. It had been decided that she was to join her husband in December ; he could not therefore object to her appearance at that time at his father's house. Cecil would have forgotten all her imperfections in his grief for her piteous fate ; the same would interest his family and incline them to receive her favourably.

It was therefore with a high heart, throbbing with blissful anticipation, that she saw the pale English cliffs rising slowly from the pale-blue sea. She caught up the child and kissed her. ' See, my little one,' she cried, her throat quivering, ' there is thy father's country, thy own England ! Thou art English, thou art sweet ! Ah, how thy father

will love thee now with thy pretty ways ! Then the little black-eyed child, haughtily tolerating the mother's caresses, contemplated its father's country with the dignity and profoundly philosophic air peculiar to a sage of twenty months, replying to these observations only by a deep, deep sigh, which seemed miraculous from so small a chest, and which inspired the mother with one of those sallies of fierce fondness that often amaze the male bystander. How, she thought, could the fine English grandparents fail to be captivated by *cette ange*, whose wisdom and witcheries increased daily and might soften the heart of Judas Iscariot ? Yet she was becomingly though not overpoweringly diffident as to the impression she might herself make upon her husband's family. She knew that she was far from ill-favoured ; she had learnt much at school ; she was strong and active, and it never struck her that muscular charms and housewifely skill were not

quite so highly valued by English *noblesse* as by Breton peasants. Besides, she had the pride of her countrymen and the dignity of moral rectitude, tempered by the peasant's shyness and the modesty of a fine nature.

On arriving at the county town, Madame Cecil, as she still duteously called herself, learned that the Marlowes were well known and popular. The family were, as usual, spending Christmas at the Grange, the landlady of her humble lodgings told her ; she knew them well, having been bred in those parts. There were four grown-up sons : two were in the army, one in the navy, and one in the law. The lawyer was Mr. Cecil, the clever one, who wrote books. Mrs. Barnes had heard him read and recite at Christmas time ; it seemed a pity that he was a lawyer, but, being the youngest, she supposed he was bound to get his living somehow. Mr. Harry, who was at sea, was married ; he had money with

his wife, and, bless you ! it was a good thing ; for the Marlowes were poor, and Lady Susan had next to nothing. So the good woman rattled on, thinking it but natural that everyone should be interested in the Marlowes. Renée listened in attentive silence, only hearing half with all her care, since English in the mouths of the English seemed more difficult and more foreign than that spoken at Paris and Orleans. But what interests is usually heard.

Madame Cecil arrived in the forenoon, paid for a night's lodging in advance, laid the child to sleep, and then, without a penny in her pocket, went out and asked the way to Cottesloe. It never entered her head to ask for a vehicle of any kind ; walking was to her the most usual as well as the most obvious way of going about.

So she set out in the brisk, bright, mid-day at a swinging pace, hungry, but unconscious of it in her excitement. He was alive and well ; only seven miles of

good highroad lay between them ; what more could be asked ?

When and where would she first see him ? What would the calm and stately Englishman say and do ? One cry of 'Renée!' would perhaps be heard, and she would be in his arms. Then he would take her to the milord his father and the miladi his mother, his eyes dim with happy tears. 'This is my wife,' he would say—'this is my poor Renée, who was dead and is alive again ;' and they, too, would embrace her, forgiving all, forgetting the lowliness of her station, and uncritical of her for joy that their son's sorrow was ended. So she pictured their meeting as she hurried along, her deep and splendid eyes darkly brilliant, her cheeks glowing, the wintry sunshine bringing out the bronze tints in her magnificent hair. Perhaps he would be dumb with glad surprise, or he might take her for a spirit, returning, as the dead were known to return on the Breton

shores, on the Jour des Morts, when tables were set and doors and windows left open for the homeless spirits wandering back. Then she would undeceive him. 'It is I—thy Renée!' she would cry; 'see, I am no spirit, but alive and warm!'

But the way was long; she was not nearly as strong as before her sedentary life and subsequent illness; she had eaten nothing that day, and she soon began to flag. After a few miles she sat on a stone, looking in vain for a calvary or a wayside cross. A church was near, but every door was fast barred. So she rested and wondered and prayed on the ebony and silver rosary. After this she took comfort. 'Courage, Renée,' she said, stepping briskly on; 'thou wilt rest soon.'

The short December day was closing; a deep rich orange suffused all the western sky. The air bit sharply; a few dry dead leaves shivered in the bare hedges,

mournful memories of summer's sweetness. Renée was sick with the excitement of anticipation ; she thought she must be very near now. She saw a carrier's cart jogging slowly along the hard dry road ; the horse's hoofs already struck sparks from the flint ; the weather-stained canvas tilt nodded with feeble inanity, like a palsy-stricken head ; the driver, sitting beneath its shelter, had something in the storm-beaten patience of his face and attitude that recalled old familiar Breton faces, and emboldened her to signal him to stop.

‘ Cottesloe Grange ! ’ he echoed slowly, as he slowly looked her all over in response to her carefully enunciated question. ‘ How fur ? Well, there, I hreckon ’taint vurry fur. You goo an so fur as them there trees. When you comes anighst they, you’ll vind the geäte. That there’s Cottesloe.’ He pointed with his whip to the gabled house standing, dark against the orange glow, on the hill, made

a clicking sound to his horse and jogged on, leaving her standing in the road, and looking at the dark house with a painful tightening of the heart.

The grand foreign mansion alarmed her, it made her feel so strange and desolate. The remembrance of her own country, of the ever-thundering surf, the bleak *landes* and sheltered dingles, the massive rock-like church, the *mænhirs* and dolmens, the wayside calvaries, the long-haired men and white-capped women and their guttural dialect, made her sick for home. The carrier's unintelligible words, interpreted by his gestures, struck on her ears with a painful sense of far-offness and strangeness. Sunset is the hour of homesickness :

‘Era già l’ora che volge il disio
Ai naviganti, e intenerisce il core,
Lo dì ch’an detto ai dolci amici addio.’

‘En tout chemin loyauté,’ is the Breton motto. Renée thought once more of father and mother and friends; she sighed a deep long sigh that was a deep long

farewell to home and country. Her loyalty was transferred: England was now her own land; her husband's people were her people. All the currents of her nature set towards him; she walked blithely on, sorrow cast behind her, bliss looming ahead, and with a beating heart entered the shadowed gate of her husband's often-described and more often-pictured home—to return thence in a few minutes disowned, desolate, out-cast.

CHAPTER VI.

UNDER THE JUDAS-TREE.

CECIL remained as if rooted to the spot, dizzied by the suddenness of his relief and almost frightened at the result of his duplicity. His wife was clean gone, unrecognised, like a dream. It was scarcely possible to believe that she had ever been there ; the momentous episode had passed so quickly, it was like an illusion of the senses, leaving him breathless and dazed as one awakening from nightmare. With a sigh that was almost a groan in its intense relief, he steadied himself by the overhanging branches of a weird and wicked-looking tree, the naked boughs of which were like tortured skeletons.

‘Don’t break it,’ his mother said, in her usual tranquil voice; ‘the Judas-tree will not bear much strain.’

‘So that is the Judas-tree?’ asked Mr. Copley, coming nearer to examine it. ‘More curious than ornamental. It looks still more uncanny in blossom.’

‘The dull red blossom is horribly suggestive of dropping blood,’ Lady Susan replied, and a little wave of chit-chat swept over and effaced the eddies made by the foreign woman’s sudden plunge into the conversation.

Then Cecil, with the mask of absolute inexpressiveness still on his features, loosed the spindling branch from his hand, and was gliding swiftly away, when his attention was caught by Cynthia.

‘Quick, Marmaduke, your knife!’ she said to her little brother, when the stranger turned away, and, sitting on the bank, partly concealed by some bushes, she cut the straps of her skates and got her feet free in a few seconds.

Then she rose, a little unsteadily at first

from the cramp of the skates, and was leaving the ice, when Cecil exclaimed in sharp, staccato tones :

‘ Where are you going, Cynthia ?’

‘ To that poor creature ; she must not be left to herself,’ she replied, hurrying towards the trees. ‘ Her brain is shaken ; she is mad from sorrow or great wrong.’

He tried to find words to stay her from rushing upon her own undoing ; but his tongue was stiff and dry, and words refused to come until she was out of hearing, when he sat down to tear off his skates, at the same time beckoning to a young man-servant, a merry-faced, fair-haired lad, with a cast in his otherwise handsome and shrewd blue eyes, who was on his knees removing the skates in the twinkling of an eye.

‘ Bob,’ Cecil said, bending his head down and speaking low, ‘ you know nothing.’

‘ A milkless cocoanut with the kernel drawed out ain’t emptier than the inside of my head, sir,’ he replied.

‘ You know whom I mean ?’ Cecil added.

‘Certainly, sir,’ he replied, with a swift upward glance.

‘She must be sighted and followed.’

‘Very good, sir.’

‘I must speak with her unseen, without leaving this too suddenly, as soon as possible.’

‘Very good, sir. In a brace of shakes, sir.’

Before the words were well out of his mouth Bob was flying down a slide that had been cut out on one side of the ice, beneath the trees, near the gate, followed by half a dozen boys, for each of whom he had a special piece of chaff, which served as spoken interlude to a popular air he was whistling. Then, having set the boys off in the opposite direction, he plunged into the firs and emerged by the entrance-gate.

Cecil, in the meantime, had risen to his feet, and was gazing hopelessly towards the black shadow of the firs in which Cynthia must now be meeting her doom. Nothing could now soften, much less avert it. The misery of it stupefied him ; he felt

nothing but a dreary desire to die. To spare Cynthia, as far as she could be spared in a situation so cruel, had been his one aim since the sight of that familiar handwriting had gone like an arrow through his heart. And now she was rushing upon her fate in its most humiliating form. Why had he let this pitiful concealment shadow his life? This great misery could never have been if he had been true to himself; but he had been false to himself, and now he found himself forced to be false, and greatly false, to others.

Scarcely had he risen and looked towards the fire, when he perceived the slender figure of Cynthia slowly emerging from the deep black shadow, with all that was left of the rich after-glow striking full in her face. So the blow had fallen upon her! A somewhat icier chill crept over his numbed heart: there was now nothing more to fear. He had discovered early in life what courage there is in despair. 'Mother,' he had asked, breaking into his mother's poetic reverie one golden

afternoon, as he lay on the grass by her side, thinking and thinking of one of those waking nightmares such as torture the imagination at six years old, 'what shall *you* do at the Day of Judgment? Shall you be awful afraid? I shan't, because it will be *too late*.'

A day of judgment had dawned now. The first words Cynthia spoke would be as the trumpet of the archangel, shattering his world and calling him to instant doom. It found him indifferent, devoid of feeling as a stone, calmly awaiting Cynthia as she returned, slowly, with downcast face and spiritless air, from the heavy shadow; he was even idly wondering that the tragedy was so faintly traced on her face, which showed clearly in the paling glow.

'Well?' he said, when she was within hearing.

He was still standing as if rooted beneath the Judas-tree's bony, distorted boughs, heedless of the feelings of those standing near, heedless of anything in the utter ruin crashing upon him, and with

only a dim foreboding that he would probably go to the dogs as quickly as possible after this. His voice was dead and meaningless, his face, dark against the western brightness, devoid of expression. 'Well?' he said, with dull leaden brevity.

She raised her head and looked straight in his face, which quivered slightly, like still water beneath a cat's-paw. Her own face was pale ; but not as pale as it seemed to him : all the light had faded from it ; her mouth had a mournful droop like that of a child when about to cry ; her deep, far-seeing gaze was clear and quiet. There was no tragedy, scarcely pathos, but chiefly pity, in the look before which he trembled like a guilty soul brought to judgment.

'No good,' she said, with a little sigh. 'Nothing to be got from her either in French, German, Italian or English. All one could say irritated her, till she became violent——'

'Violent!'

'Oh,' with a smile, 'it only took my

breath away for a moment. It is clear that, if not actually mad, she has had a great shock. Her eyes—I never saw anything so terrible. It is too cruel to leave her to herself.’

‘My dear child, *you* are not her keeper.’

‘Yes, I am; she is my sister and yours too. Perhaps she has escaped from an asylum. With all your knowledge, can’t you tell us how far we may legally take care of wandering sisters? Oh, there is your father; he is a magistrate; he will know what to do.’

In this second and most unexpected relief the very earth seemed to stagger as it turned on its way; miracle followed miracle; nature was clearly out of course; stars might soon be expected to fall like ripe fruit. He saw Cynthia and his father meet, and then merge in the group of friends closing round them, unsuspectingly discussing the one subject; he caught some reassuring phrases, doubts as to the wisdom and lawfulness of interfering with harmless lunatics and eccentric foreigners,

and heard them accuse Cynthia of quixotism. 'She said herself it was a mistake,' Dick observed. 'Foreigners always go on like that,' added Mr. Copley soothingly. 'Especially in the lower classes,' Lady Susan said.

And then a little discussion arose as to the exact lowness of the stranger's class, in the midst of which Cecil heard a sound that made him turn to see his servant lounging aimlessly behind the Judas-tree, with a look of utter vacuity on his ruddy face, and singing :

' My father's a hedger and ditcher,
My mother does nothing but spin,
And I'se a charming young feller,
And the money comes tumbling in.'

'Down the road and along by Lowood Copse,' he added, without turning his head, or appearing to see his master, who passed him slowly by in an equally aimless and unheeding manner.

'Oh, Bob, what a stunning chap you are!' cried little Hugh Forde-Cusacke, attracted by this beautiful song and

running up to admire the popular Bob, who, having finished his song, reversed himself and walked on his hands to divert him.

‘Just so, little Master Huge,’ he replied, coming right side uppermost again, catching the boy up and suspending him by the waistband ; ‘that’s just what I said to the parish pump when I run my head agen him coming home from my granmer’s funeral, on a dark night near about five o’clock of a fine summer’s morning, after drinking of the dear old lady’s health in a jar of the best bottled Adam’s ale. “Ain’t you a stunning chap?” says I, putting of a pitch plaster on my head.’ Where-upon little Hugh’s laughter was so excruciating and shrill that it drew a crowd of little boys and the attention of many grown-up people to the source of so much mirth.

The twilight was coming on when Cecil, without pausing or seeming either to hear or heed his servant’s information, sauntered along in a purposeless way, until he

reached the cover of a belt of trees, by skirting which and crossing the park in a bee-line, he could make a short cut unseen to Lowood Copse, through which the highroad ran. Then he set off at full speed, further concealed by the dip of the land from the house and its approaches. .

The highroad running through the copse was little frequented, especially at this hour. The dusk, even at high noon entangled in thick over-hanging oak-tops, was now deepened to darkness; the last light was fading from the moonless sky, in which a few keen stars were slowly twinkling and heavy clouds looming. The western after-glow was almost hidden behind Cottesloe, yet it was not so dark but that the gleaming of faces and shining of eyes could be clearly discerned, and the shape of a human figure well made out. The pale grayness of the frost-bound road running through the wood was distinct, and a good stretch of the road beyond was visible from this covert, which Renée could not yet have reached by the circuitous

way of the highroad. He stood watching within the shadows, and, as his servant had calculated, soon perceived a woman's figure coming along between the dark hedge-rows.

“O Adelheid, Adelheid, mourn not for the lost!” he heard her repeating in a heart-broken voice.

She had used Lord Lytton's ‘Pilgrims of the Rhine’ as an English reading-book, and had written in careful English to her husband the story of the lady in Purgatory who was permitted to return to console her mourning lover at the cost of a century longer in the flame, and found him on earth happy in the arms of another love. And now, like that lady, who was heedless of purgatorial fires in the fiercer flame of forgotten love, she kept repeating, “O Adelheid, Adelheid, mourn not for the lost!”

When she entered the brown aisle formed by over-arching oaks, he stepped forth from the bush-grown strip of grass along the road's edge, catching the pale

relics of the after-glow on his face, so that she could not mistake him.

‘Renée,’ he said in a low but deeply shaken voice, ‘Renée!’

She started and turned from him, so that her own face received what now remained of the light. The blaze of concentrated scorn and fury in her large deep eyes startled and appalled him. Was this Renée? Could such fires burn in the soft eyes which had too deeply touched him three years ago? Such scorn be on the lips which but now were repeating with such heart-break, “O Adelheid, Adelheid, mourn not for the lost!”

She waved him away and was going on, but he caught her and held her face to face with him. ‘Renée, Renée!’ he repeated. ‘It is I, Cecil, your husband!’ But she remained silent.

‘What is this, dear Renée? Do you not know me?’

‘No.’

They stood face to face, sideways to the faint light, Renée pale and perfectly still,

though a perpetual faint tremor shook her invisibly and her lips twitched slightly; Cecil leaden-faced and trembling.

He laughed an unnatural laugh. 'My dear Renée, what nonsense!' he said very gently, speaking always in French, a most convenient tongue to tell lies in, while she in her deadly earnest could only speak Breton. 'Of course it was a mistake. I didn't know what I did or said. You see it was so sudden. The shock stupefied me. Why, only this morning I thought you dead—long dead—God help me!' he added, with sudden self-pity.

Then the torrent of his wife's anger burst madly forth:

'A three-months widower and his wife alive, after all! Oh, it was cruel!' she cried, her voice shaken with sobbing laughter. 'Before the new mistress, too, or the new wife——' She did not know what she said, she was so bruised and broken by the hour of torture she had just suffered; the blood ran like fire in her veins, her ears sang, a crimson mist was

before her eyes. He did not understand all ; but some plain, downright words, such as plain country-people use and which make the ears of fine folk tingle, struck sharply upon his ears.

‘Listen,’ he cried, white with anger. ‘I was faithful until your supposed death.’

‘Saints in heaven ! He was faithful—faithful till the day I died ! What a husband ! He waited—actually *waited*—for his wife’s death,’ she burst out with the same sobbing laughter.

He looked at her darkly, so darkly and with such threatening that the flood of her wrath stayed, and a deadly chill struck to her heart. ‘Mrs. Marlowe,’ he said, with savage politeness, ‘pray remember that you are, unfortunately for both of us, my wife. Renée,’ he added with a sudden change, ‘you were gentle and sweet—once. You were the mother of a little girl. You helped me in my need, you were kind and faithful, and for that I—loved you.’

‘Once !’ she echoed. ‘No, Cecil, you

never loved me. Heaven! do I not know how a man looks when he loves? Did I not see it when you looked at that accurséd one? Ah, that is why I must always wait and wait. Always some new thing to keep me hidden in France. That is why you called yourself a painter, and lived with us as poor people live, fishing, digging—God knows! You, a learned advocate, a son of noble family, born in that fine château, loved by fine ladies! You never loved me as you do that broomstick with the soft voice and useless hands. You would have two wives or twenty—who knows?’

‘Listen!’ he said, holding her hands in his powerful and ever-tightening grasp, until they were cramped and crushed. ‘Before God, I mean to be a faithful husband to you. I never meant otherwise.’ His large, luminous dark eyes glowed in the shadows with a fire that wrought upon her in spite of herself; the iron grasp on her hands tightened still more till they were bruised.

‘Let me go,’ she cried indignantly, ‘you bad, false man!’

He was almost daunted by the blue blaze of the angry eyes, but he did not relax the cruel grasp on her struggling hands. ‘I wronged you,’ he said; ‘I will make amends. I was wrong to leave you; I will leave you no more. Tell me where you are stopping, and to-morrow, when you are in your right mind——’

She had left off struggling as if from exhaustion. His grasp relaxed accordingly; she took advantage of it, freed herself by a sudden effort, and fled. He followed and overtook her; she turned, and partly struck, partly pushed, him with all her strength, which was considerable. They were now in the thick darkness beneath the oaks; the bushy ground was rough, and he was unprepared for a blow: he staggered, caught his foot in a bramble, and crashed full length on the ground. By the time he regained his feet she had plunged so far into the darkness that the sound of her footsteps was heard no more.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SNOWSTORM.

THE wind freshened at sunset, blowing sharper and sharper from the north and driving heavy clouds over the moonless sky till the last lingering gleam in the west was extinguished; so that long before Cecil's fruitless search for the fugitive was finished the wood was black with blinding mid-winter blackness, into which fields and roads were now absorbed.

If his wife had fled by the highroad, he must have heard her footsteps on its wind-swept hardness; but her disappearance was complete and without trace—the darkness had noiselessly swallowed her. She might be lurking near in the blackness, but was

clearly undiscoverable. The few footsteps audible during his search proved to be those of belated skaters trudging homewards, or fresh-comers for the night skating, which would not be in full swing until later. A snatch of song in a well-known voice came and was taken up and burdened by other voices ; five red spots from as many pipes moved along the black road ; a boy went whistling home ; a white owl hooted, as he flitted ghost-like from his ivy—but of Renée nothing was heard.

A distant swinging and moving light, accompanied by footsteps, was doubtless a lantern. The well-known fields were one blind black mass, on which even the trees made no deeper darkness ; but Cecil knew his way blindfold, and went quickly up in a straight line to the house, avoiding the drive, down which two orange lights moved, indicating the carriage of some late departing guest. Other carriages would soon move up the drive, bringing people to dine ; there was barely time to dress when he gained the house unobserved

by a side-door. Yet he glided softly into the dimly-lighted drawing-room, behind a servant, and sat silently in the shadow that he might appear to have been there for some time.

No doubt they were all talking of the incident on the ice : the very winds had risen and shrieked of it ; the naked boughs in the wood were chattering of it ; dry, dead leaves whispered and tittered over it as they rustled out of their hiding-places at the call of the bitter blast. But the familiar fireside scene was calm and untroubled as usual ; if anything, a little quieter. The ladies were near the fire, talking trifles disjointedly ; the General was not there ; Dick was yawning over a paper near a shaded lamp ; Lady Susan was at a writing-table behind a screen, lighted by a pair of tapers, so Cecil slipped easily into the conversation. The sky foretold wind as well as frost at sunset, he averred ; the frost would probably hold ; snow might come.

‘ Why, Cecil, I did not know you were

in the room,' came tranquilly from the writing-table, as the pen scratched on.

Cynthia laughed gently and happily at some infinitesimal jest between herself and Amy Marlowe. It was ghastly to Cecil. Had he really been in the wood a few minutes since with the desperate maddened woman who was his wife? And where was she wandering outside in the dark, cold night? When Cynthia and Amy laughed together over the misfortunes of certain earnest but unskilful skaters, it seemed as if they could not possibly have been witnesses of the hideous thing he had done before their eyes.

All the evening long he felt like a soul wandering among old familiar friends and scenes, during a brief respite from purgatorial flames. Cynthia's utter unconsciousness of what was in his mind, her extremely youthful air, emphasized by her dress and the vicinity of some worn and anxious middle-aged faces, the under-current of innocent happiness manifested in her voice, whether she spoke gravely or

gaily, and the interest and admiration she excited, all conspired to fill him with biting remorse: how long dared he wait before extinguishing with one word all that sweet and guileless gaiety?

‘No doubt,’ he heard in the voice of his mother in confidential conversation just behind him on a sofa, while he played whist with his back towards her—‘no doubt boys are often cruel. Yet ours were not. My youngest son, especially, was excessively tender-hearted—too much so, my husband thought, for a lad.’

His wife had other views on that tenderness of heart, he thought, with savage self-hatred. Want of consideration for a vitally important step, heedless yielding to a generous impulse, and mere indulgence of selfish fancies, were scarcely signs of excessive tenderness of heart.

‘Oh no,’ the same voice was saying in answer to Lady Boresby’s murmured lamentations, ‘we had no trouble on that score. Our boys were always perfectly truthful and open. There was nothing

underhand in them. But we always trusted to their honour.'

The word—that word of words, the sound of which thrills the most sensitive fibres of the heart, the faintest whisper of which once had power to make swords leap from scabbards, and which still enables men and women to suffer and to die—called a hot flush to his face. Had he indeed been one of those frank, fearless lads, with nothing to conceal, nothing to blush for, nothing to reproach himself with? The youngest of those honest boys was dead and gone now; his last spark of life went out three hours since when that irretrievable thing was done beneath the Judas-tree. He was fully committed now to a life of intricate falsehood; he could *never* tell Cynthia, and yet she would surely know it one day—perhaps to-morrow, perhaps ten years hence, but the day must come when she would know it.

Cecil was not to be seen at the breakfast-table next morning. A servant reported

that he had started for the county town and would not return till evening. Mr. Ryall said that his master had important legal business there. Mr. Ryall was also gone.

‘He’s gone to Wilbury’s,’ Richard explained. ‘Wilbury has a good law library. He is strong on marriage law ; that is his speciality.’

‘And that is just where Cecil is weak,’ his mother added. ‘He is probably reading up for the bigamy case that is coming on next assizes.’

Cynthia said nothing, but thought much. She thought that she was not the kind of woman to put up with a fraction or mere remnant of a husband ; it was Christmas Eve ; they were newly engaged and newly met after long absence, and yet Cecil went off for the day without a word. The world was clearly out of joint ; people must be made to see this.

In the meantime, the subject of her thoughts, far more strongly convinced than she of the unsatisfactory condition of things mundane, was riding in the teeth

of a cutting wind which was edged now and then with a fine penetrating snow, deeply meditating upon the legality of international marriages, and calling to mind that, having acquired the habit of signing himself Cecil Marlowe, his full Christian name being William Cecil, he had signed a legal document in this manner in Brittany, and subsequently kept to it for consistency. That signature might invalidate his marriage.

It was virtually dissolved ; it had never been a marriage in any deep and spiritual sense of the word. His action on the previous night had been a knife to cut asunder the most sacred and binding of human ties ; his subsequent efforts to reunite the severed bonds had been and always must be futile ; he was quite sure that Renée would never again consent to live with him. For there was more than the fury of a wronged woman in her blazing eyes and burning words : there was the deadly hate that springs from the ashes of love ; moreover, when she pushed him

so violently from her in the wood, she extinguished the last remnants of tenderness for her in her husband's heart ; it was now war to the knife between them.

She was vindictive, and her best weapon of revenge was a concealment from which she could at any moment spring upon him ; for the present she would probably content herself with the power her mere existence gave her of preventing his remarriage.

If any flaw might be discovered in the legality of the marriage he would certainly have it set aside ; meanwhile, all must go on as before ; no soul must ever know the meaning of that occurrence on the ice. Of course the fact of a previous marriage must sooner or later be disclosed, but never in connection with that incident. Luckily for him, Renée, agitated to a degree that seemed insanity to English spectators and disguised in city garb, had not in those few moments been identified with the Corregan of the water-colour sketch, which was fortunately no longer

visible to stimulate memories and suggest comparisons. So he mused, racking his brain and ransacking his stores of learning to find some way of escape from these hated bonds.

But where was Renée? What if he should meet her at the next turning or the next?

On leaving the wood the night before, she had flown back, winged with indignation and misery, to the lodging at which she had left her child, feeling neither cold nor hunger as she hurried along the dark road in the teeth of the bitter night wind. The lights of the town dazzled her; she could scarcely find the small house in the unfrequented back street, and when she went into her small room the sudden warmth made her feel faint. The moment the child heard her tired footfall, it came running, open-armed, with uncertain steps and delighted gurgles and cries, to meet her. She took it up, covered it with caresses, and cried bitterly until its frightened whimper made her restrain herself. Its

father did not so much as know if the poor little heart still beat; he had not so much as mentioned it; he had tacitly refused his share in it, so that the little unwelcome life would at least be all her own. Being now the baby's sole protector, she would have to work for its maintenance as well as her own; she therefore decided to seek employment at once in any capacity open to her, and at once asked her landlady's advice on the subject, representing herself as a widow left without means. For immediate necessities she disposed of a gold watch, her husband's gift.

All night in the blank darkness she lay wide-eyed, with the little girl sleeping peacefully in her arms, while the events of that bitter afternoon repeated themselves again and again. In the silence of the solitary night Cecil's words in the wood penetrated her mind, which at first had been too much shaken to receive fresh impressions, and she softened towards him. He was indeed faithless, and he had

never loved her, but he had not intended disloyalty; he had been surprised into that cruel denial, but he wished to make all right again as far as possible. Nor could she blame him for trying to spare that other woman; in the calm, still night she could even pity her rival, who had been still more cruelly deceived than herself. Yet that woman's sweetness and pity for her miserable, maddened self had increased her jealous hate. Had she been ugly, stupid, despicable, there might have been some comfort and hope; but Renée could detect no fault in the sweet-faced, sweet-voiced girl, who had left her pleasure for the sake of a stranger half distraught and savage with misery.

The comfortless gray day came; it wore on, her grief increased, her heart softened, and the reaction from yesterday's fury set in; an immense longing took her to see her husband once more and part more kindly. Then the little one was his; he had a right to it, and the child had a claim on him; he must at least be told of its

existence. Just to forgive him and be forgiven before parting for ever was all that life seemed worth now. She felt in her heart's core that he would never take her back, that she could never forget what she was trying to forgive; at the best, it would always rise and rise as a black wall between them. Yet, so complex and enigmatic is the heart of woman, even in her hopelessness there was a faint, scarcely conscious hope that in time, when this new love, whom he could never marry, was forgotten, he might return to his allegiance and all yet be well; for the child was a strong bond between them: it was against nature that a man should be long indifferent to his own daughter.

She took the ebony and silver rosary and, with a sharp penknife, scratched on the back of the crucifix the word 'Pardon'; she would put that in his hands; it would tell him all that was in her heart. And, while slowly carving the word in the hard wood, she thought of the day when he gave it to her. It was then that she first

feared he did not love her—now she was certain.

She left the lodging some time after noon, first giving the little sleeping girl a long, long kiss ; when she shut the door behind her and went out into the cold street, a feeling grew upon her that the gray little foreign town had always been familiar to her in its unfamiliarity, and that all her life had been a series of stages leading up to this point. The cold, fast-closed church, with never an image above its portal, with its gilt-lettered clock, its flimsy crockets and colourless windows, was familiar—it had always given her that dreary chill ; these foreigners going and coming, all costumed alike in different degrees of shabbiness, with no blouses, no cambric caps, no country costumes, no priestly cassocks and broad hats, had often oppressed and saddened her ; that bewildering clack of unintelligible words had tormented her often and often before.

Thin snow-streaks tapestried the houses on one side of the street, leaving the other

side bare ; windows were half curtained by it, shops, dressed in their Christmas bravery, were almost invisible. Children scraped patches on the frosted panes with numbed fingers that they might see the treasures displayed within ; there was brisk movement along the windy streets ; people were hurrying to and fro with baskets and parcels ; holly and mistletoe were sprinkled in boys' caps and men's hats everywhere ; the shining leaves and berries could have come only from Brittany.

Centuries seemed to have passed, since yesterday, when she had traversed the same road, upborne by love and hope. Every remembered object by the wayside—the solidly-built house standing cosily behind its great black yew, powdered now to the windward with snow ; the cottage, with dormer windows peeping like eyes from the thatch, and porch overgrown with ivy and leafless creepers ; the red-curtained public-house with its fine elms, bench and horse-trough in front ; the farm with yellow ricks among leafless trees, with

barns and straw-littered yard, where cows pulled hay peacefully from racks, and fowls cowered in sheltered corners—all were invested with a mute pathos, like that in the portraits of dead friends. Hedgerow trees, copses, and upland fallows seemed to gaze at her in a silent pity that almost made them breathe; all sorrowed with her, mourning beneath the thin veil of wind-rent snow that lay over the face of the land and drifted here and there into strange shapes. The sky was low and fleecy, with opal tints and blue gleams breaking here and there through the piled snow-clouds; windy scuds of fine, blinding snow kept driving at intervals, sometimes going over her head when she had the shelter of hedge or bank, sometimes whitening her on one side from head to foot, so that she had to stop and shake her clothes and hair free from it.

There was no one on the ice when she reached Cottesloe. The snow was more persistent and the opalescent gleams in

the west were fading as the day drew to its swift end and warm lights began to redden cottage windows. The carriage-drive was bare in the bitter wind, which swept falling and fallen snow alike across to the crest of the rising ground. Madame Cecil paused in the shadow of the fir-trees at the gate, disheartened. Why had she come? Perhaps with a vague hope of meeting him in the neighbourhood; for she did not mean to go to the house and ask openly for him. Yet she went up the steep winding road in the snow-whitened dusk, until she came suddenly in front of the house and looked it full in the face.

Though the Grange was partially masked from this approach by shrubs and trees, the drive being sheltered from the blast by the same, a ruddy warmth glowed from some uncurtained windows, and especially from two on either side of the door, which was protected by an ample stone porch with a short flight of steps. Renée paused irresolute before the comfortable house,

with its chimneys smoking against the pale western sky, its front darkly massed in the deepening dusk and pierced with the dull glow of fire-lit windows. No creature was stirring without, not even a watch-dog. Who would be out on that bitter afternoon? Doubtless *he* was sitting in the warm glow within; she might see him and beckon him forth.

A group of slender silver firs rose from among some evergreens on one side of a lighted window, flush with the ground; stealing into the shade of these, she looked in at the window, herself invisible and her steps inaudible on the snow, which had drifted knee-high on the windward side of the clump of firs. The jut of the porch sheltered this window from the almost level snow-lines, which now drew a semi-transparent curtain before the house, so that Renée, though meeting the cutting drift full with her side-face, could see fairly well slantwise into the interior.

A bright fire blazed on a hearth almost opposite the door: it was the first hearth-

fire she had seen in England ; it was very home-like, and made her think of other hearths she would see no more. A screen stood on one side of the hearth, sheltering some arm-chairs ; a broad oaken staircase was dimly visible beyond. An oaken table and some settles about the fire recalled the Breton home ; a cushioned lounge was on the other side of the hearth, something like the panelled bed-place at home ; here the comparison between the hall of the ruined French castle and that of the English mansion ended. Instead of homely necessities, here were luxuries—thick fur rugs and sumptuous hangings, polished parquet and bright steel andirons, pictures, busts, Indian cabinets and inlaid metal-work, swords modern and ancient, and other trophies of war and sport. In every pause of the wind and the light crackling of the snow she heard voices, soft trebles of women and children, clear laughter, and the deeper notes of a man's voice ; there was movement and life in the warm hearth-glow, figures were passing with

long green wreaths, the sharp tap of a hammer sounded now and again, for it was Christmas Eve and they were decking the hall.

This, then, was her husband's home, the object of so many dreams and desires, so handsome and luxurious in comparison with the simple dwelling whence he had taken her ; at last she saw the warm blaze of his hearth, but from without, in the winter dusk, exposed to the full fury of the drifting snowstorm.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STORY OF THE SWORD.

AT first she could see nothing clearly ; the warm dancing radiance dazzled her eyes, accustomed to the white and dizzying whirl of the snow-storm. She was faint with sorrow, cold from the long walk in the bitter blast, and weak with prolonged fasting ; all swam before her, greenery, firelight and figures within, and the wavering, rapid snow-lines and dark house-front without. She stayed herself against the trunk of the silver fir, which was coated with snow, and felt as if the world was slipping away from beneath her feet. Just then the sound of a horse's hoofs, now loud on the wind-swept gravel, now dulled

on the fallen snow, rose and passed behind her ; a dog barked, arousing another and another ; a gate opened and fell to with a clang ; men's voices called and answered them ; then these and other confused sounds died away and only the sharp minute rustle of the snow and shriek of the wind sounded without, and the faint-heard voices and quick tap-tap of the hammer within. Now her vision was steady again, and, sweeping the snow from her cheek and hair, she looked in and felt as if some savage thing were clutching at her heart. There, with shining hair, in the full hearth-glow, as one at home, stood the graceful figure of that nameless hated woman. Love does not magnify personal charm more than jealousy ; the woman watching outside in the cold saw with dazzled vision and felt with a strength that intoxicated her, every faintest attraction, every lightest grace, of her who stood within in the warmth.

She was standing on some movable wooden steps, her arms raised, thus revealing the youthful grace of her figure,

and her head thrown back and slightly turned so as to show her sweet laughing face and that loveliest curve of the neck, where it rose from the delicate lace of the high gown to the small shining ear; she was speaking to her little brother, who held the long rope of evergreen she was nailing among the trophies of arms above the chimney.

Who could resist such beauty and fascination, such youth and sweetness, set off as it was by severely simple dress and the nameless something that the lowly born are quick to see in those of higher station? The deep, brilliant blue eyes beneath the fir-shadows were fixed as if spell-bound in their burning intensity upon the unconscious face in the firelight; so keenly, so burningly, and with such self-forgetting were they fixed on the dainty young face within, a face then expressive of little beyond an innocent enjoyment of life, it seemed a marvel that the flower-freshness did not wither and the serenity die from it beneath that glance of fire.

Cynthia tapped on, unconscious of her beauty, unconscious of a rival's unwilling homage to it, wondering if Cecil would be detained by the storm, wondering why he had left her that whole long day, untroubled by the lightest suspicion of evil or sorrow, least of all by the thought that her lover's wife was at that moment devouring her with glances of passionate jealousy, following her slightest gesture, noting the grace and charm of her youth in the glamour and exaggeration of jealous despair. A sharper rattling of the fine-pointed snow-drift on branch and window-pane made Cynthia turn with a charmingly careless movement to look at the wild white whirl sweeping tremulously past the window. Her face softened with the delicious sense of fireside warmth and security in sight of the bitter storm. She turned back to finish her work, singing softly with a plaintive abandonment into which perfect happiness so often overflows :

“ Freeze, freeze, thou bitter sky,
Thou dost not bite so nigh
As benefits forgot ;

Though thou the waters warp,
Thy sting is not so sharp
As friend remembered not.”’

‘Remembered not,’ echoed a bass voice with exaggerated lugubriousness; and then the other voices joined in and took up the refrain,

‘“Sing heigh ho! the green holly!
This life is most jolly”’—

and the sound was borne above the wailing wind to the snow-shrouded figure in the outside night.

The chorus culminated in a burst of laughter when Richard Marlowe, having stepped back to see the effect of the mistletoe he had just suspended beneath a hanging lamp, was unexpectedly gratified by the appearance of young Mrs. Marlowe exactly beneath the pearly berries, and immediately took advantage of it, to the delight of the little Forde-Cusackes and laughing, feigned indignation of the surprised lady.

The laughter died away, and the lady of the mistletoe, holding her three-years-old

boy by the hand, vanished behind the screen with two older lads and the fair-haired man, leaving Cynthia, still astir with laughter, alone on her eminence.

Suddenly the white whirl slackened without ; the fine, tremulous horizontal lines slanted, became perpendicular, then blurred and uncertain, and finally dispersed in a few large floating flakes. But Renée did not observe that the keen drift no longer stung her cheek and ear, though she mechanically brushed the fine chill powder from her face ; her eyes dilated, her heart throbbed violently, and then stood still ; she caught at the tree lest she should fall and lie in the fan of ruddy light streaming from the hall window upon the snow. Someone had entered the hall from behind, his footsteps unheard on the deep rugs, and now stood within the screen, looking at Cynthia's side-face with a long soft, half-anguished, half-raptured gaze.

‘*Mon homme, O mon homme !*’ Renée moaned, her heart beginning to throb wildly again, after its sudden standstill.

Cynthia was turning to descend, when she caught sight of him, surprised in her unconsciousness. The soft brightness of her beautiful eyes shone out, a quick radiance flashed over her face; with some word of glad surprise trembling on her lips, she held out both hands; Cecil, quivering, caught them in his. She stepped lightly down, and they stood face to face in the full glow of the blazing logs. He drew back a moment, letting fall the hands, so slim and white and small—so different, the on-looker thought, from hers, which were reddened and roughened by coarse work—and pressed his own together for a moment.

Then he threw back his head with a lion-like gesture his wife knew well; and then, as if overmastered by an imperious impulse, stepped half a pace forward, and, bending, took the slender figure near him in his arms, and kissed her upturned face. The fir-trees groaned overhead in the blast and let some caked snow fall upon Renée, who was unconscious of anything but that terrible kiss, that cruel kiss, which seared

the last lingering tenderness from her bruised heart and pressed the life out of her soul.

Yet her blazing glance did not blench from the torturing sight ; she noted with keen anguish that the man was deeply agitated, as if impelled by overpowering passion to an unintentional caress, which the woman received and returned with a calm, warm tenderness that showed it was neither the first nor unexpected. Oh ! that the fire would leap from the hearth and envelop them in devouring flame ; that the roof-tree would fall and crush them, the hearthstone split and rive asunder and swallow them up ! Should she crash blindly through the window-pane and shout the truth in their startled ears ? Should she curse them there on his father's hearthstone in the presence of all ? Her eyes were blinded for a moment by a red mist, and there was a roaring as of many leagues of surf in her ears.

In the meantime those lovers moved

quietly apart, while other figures appeared before the fire, the whole family grouping about the hearth, on which a large fresh log was thrown. These looked at the holly and mistletoe, the débris of which was being removed by servants, who lighted the hanging lamp and drew curtains across the shuttered windows.

But not across this window; a fresh scud of snow was drawing a white ghostly curtain over the outer night and it seemed to please the fancy of the children in the warmth; they stepped forwards and looked out into the dizzying storm, and the servant, about to close the shutter, withdrew. The others approached the window and looked out, speaking together as if discussing the wild weather; the three-years-old boy danced on his mother's arm and stretched his little pink hands out to the storm; she was doubtless telling him such fairy nonsense as pleases children, about falling feathers and floating flowers. The mother in the shadow, two yards away, felt the

magic of the little happy hands ; it was as if they were laid upon her rent and shaken heart, drawing the bitterness from its wounds. So the actual touch of her own little girl's hands, when they crept about her breast, had often soothed the pain within. Then her fury left her, giving place to a deeper, keener, and yet less bitter anguish. The venom was gone, but the wound bled more.

How could these things be otherwise ? She, too, clearly saw her own unfitness, and the fitness of that other, to win Cecil's love ; she saw that her own wild love for him had spoilt his life and ruined his happiness. ' He was too good for me,' she sighed, and she thought of the violence of Hoël Calloc, from which he for ever delivered her on that bygone summer afternoon.

Those within were grouped about the hearth again. The wind veered half a point, and drew the long quivering lines of snow between Renée and this family scene. A strange weight was in her head and all

her numbed limbs ; she was no longer quite certain of anything.

Her memory went back to a wild night at sea at home, when a storm fell upon her father's boat, and, the sail having been taken in, her brothers rowed and she steered ; the surf then was like moving snow-wreaths and the spray flew in fine, white spin-drift, like this fine driving snow. Then the surf vanished, and the whirling snowflakes were apple-blossoms showering down in the May sunshine in the orchard at home. Cecil approached, smiling, and snowed all over by the falling petals, and rendered her that first service which won her heart. Then the blossoms vanished, and summer sunbeams fell shimmering through the branched tree-tops in flakes of gold and quivered on the gay dresses of the dancers in the whirling gavotte on her wedding-day. And now once more apple-blossoms showered in fragrant snow, resting in her hair and on the face of her young babe. A strange peace fell upon her heart ; the blossoms dispersed, there was sunshine ;

it changed to the fan of light streaming from the uncurtained window. The storm had lulled; she could see the group within clearly once more.

A pleasant sight those three generations—the fine soldierly grandfather; the grandmother, still in her prime, the faintly silvered coils of her black hair just touched with fine lace, her little grandson asleep in her arms, with one dimpled leg drooping in helpless grace on her velvet skirts; the young mother and the fair-haired father, against whom the youngest of the two rosy lads leaned, while the elder lay on the rug before the fire, his arm round the neck of a collie dog; and those lovers, a little apart from the others, in a sort of charmed permitted solitude. The nameless woman was sitting on the cushioned lounge, opposite the grandfather. Cecil was by her side, shadowed by the jut of the chimney-piece; his arm lay along the back of the lounge behind her; he seemed conscious of nothing but her presence, the charm of which struck

sharp to the heart of the woman in the snowstorm. She in the warmth shivered slightly ; he bent towards her, as if asking a question. She seemed to reply ; he rose and left the area visible from the fir-shadows. Soon he returned with a wrap on his arm, in which he enfolded her with gentle care. But the same hands which wrapped the beloved so tenderly in the warm, soft shawl cramped and crushed the unloved in a stiff and icy shroud, the deadly cold of which pierced her vitals.

One of the lads pointed to a sword hanging on the wall. The young soldier rose and took it down, showing it to the boys, drawing and making passes with it. The lads were delighted ; the naked blade flashed in the firelight. The gray-haired soldier smiled, and, seeming to yield to many entreaties, he took the sword his son handed him, and, after pointing to dints and stains upon it, laid it across his knees. Then they all seemed to be listening intently, especially the boys, while the grandfather told a tale, illustrating it with

the sword. The eyes of the sweet lady on the lounge grew more brilliant, and flashed with the flashing of the upraised sword.

The tale was thrilling; but that lover in the shadow had eyes and attention only for the sweet lady at his side.

Yes, it was a pleasant home scene, but she who stood in the snow without began to be confused and to wonder at it. That grandfather was surely not Michel K  rouac; his hair was too short. Those young men, where were their long black curls, their country costume and sabots? The grandmother, the M  re Suzanne, had no distaff, and where was her white cap? Why did she sit idle while the child slept, its pretty drooping leg rosy in the firelight, its fair curls shining? How was it that C  cile's little dark head had that golden aureole? C  cile was not yet in Paradise—where was she? Who were those young women? How many times had P  re Michel told that tale by the Christmas fire, and yet how the

listeners' eyes sparkled! One might think they had never heard it before.

The weight left her body; a delicious lightness was in her head; a soft languor relaxed her limbs. The fireside group grew vague and distant, then it appeared again and changed once more. Those were altar-lights; it was her first Communion. The organ music boomed softly; the voices of the choir seemed those of singing angels; white veils and white wings floated before her dazzled eyes. She had made her confession well; her soul was quite white and she was very quiet and happy.

The long dark eyelashes met on Renée's white, cold face; the reawaking storm placed some pure, feathery snowflakes upon them. The deep, brilliant blue eyes would see nothing distressful any more for ever; the broken heart was at rest.

The tale went on by the fireside. The naked sword was raised glittering in the lamplight; the interest had reached a climax; the listeners were absorbed in rapt

attention. Only the grandmother stirred and turned her head slightly at the shriek of the rising storm, to see white flakes driven in hurrying confusion upon the blast. Then the child moved in his sleep and smiled; his rounded limbs took a pose of sweeter childish grace. The lovers remained unmoved in their charmed isolation; the man's eyes, looking upon the sweet young face beside him, had a flame in them. The logs cracked merrily on the hearth, and the snow fell hissing in the flame.

Softly and soundlessly it fell without, no longer sharp-pointed and stinging, but in feathery flakes in the lull of the sudden shrieking gust. With soft, invincible, merciless tenderness feather after feather, each pure as if from an angel's wing, was laid upon Renée's darkened eyes and still face, daintily and silently, as if there were danger of breaking her deep, dreamless sleep, or rousing the old pain in the heart for ever at rest.

Flake after flake descended until the

dark hair was veiled in bridal white and the statue-like form wrapped in thick white fairy fleece, through which the bitter blast might never penetrate; viewless hands wove daintiest raiment, fit for bridal or for maiden burial, and placed it slowly and silently with thoughtful precision upon her; they hung a curtain before her to conceal those lovers from her aching sight and screen her from the mocking radiance of her husband's hearth; they fashioned a coverlet of regal ermine to shroud her in her long and peaceful sleep.

The tale had long been told by the Christmas fire, the hearth was deserted, the one fan of light blotted from the snow. The house loomed black and gloomy through the ghostly storm with a golden glimmer here and there, where was a crack in window-shutter or blind; cheerful voices and laughter and music sounded within; Christmas carols were sung. The songs died into silence, the hearths grew cold, the little spirals as of life-breath rose no more from the chimneys, the golden gleams

shone no more from the dark house ; nothing sounded within but the steady ticking of clocks, the skittering feet and minute shriek of mice, and the deep, soft, long-drawn breath of sleepers.

Without the silence was still more profound ; snowflake fell on soft snowflake without sound, the wind had grown gentle and cut no more deep hollows and delicate arabesques in the pure snow-marble. The draped trees stood immovable, while those viewless hands silently charged their minutest sprays with soft feathering, the clouds moved noiselessly from the deep night-sky, and at last wind and snow ceased. Great white stars looked down on the still white earth, striking keen minute sparkles from the tiny snow crystals, and then rolled away into the darkness ; others shone forth and sparkled upon the six-foot drift piled against the silver firs.

The deep silence was at last broken by the tumultuous melody of bells ringing in the Christmas morning ; joyously, clearly, the

mellow music poured down and spread itself in melodious waves above the snow-laden firs and the strangely sculptured snow-drift under which Renée still stood waiting, her face turned towards the place where the lovers sat together in the hearth-glow, watching with darkened eyes and stilled heart, while her little child, which had cried itself to sleep over-night, woke in the cold morning and cried again for the mother who would never return.

CHAPTER IX.

THE STATUE IN THE BLOCK.

A RICH orange dawn began a clear, keen, blue Christmas Day, revealing a world of purest, sparkling white, azure-shadowed and carved and fretted into fairest fantastic shapes.

The two boys, wakened by the continued pealing of the bells, were astir before the last stars had faded, and busy breathing the rime from their window to see the marvellous spectacle of faery disclosing itself in the frosty sunrise, which they welcomed with exclamations of surprise and delight.

They stormed, half dressed, into Cecil's room, the windows of which looked down

on the silver firs ; but he bid them go with an amiability that promised no fun. Then they rushed in to Dick, who vainly feigned slumber, and, after first snoring and then growling genially beneath the clothes, at last rose to the occasion and threw things at them till they retreated shouting. Next they danced in to Cynthia, who kissed their firm round cheeks and asked if they had said their prayers, after which she also rose to the occasion and sat up, flushed with sleep, and half shrouded in her shining hair, to hear of the deep snow-fall and the strange fantasies of the drifts, the joyous tidings that no one could ‘tub’ that morning because ‘every blessed pipe on the place is froze, Bob says,’ the despair of servants who could not get to stables and outhouses, the serious misfortune that the postman could not call with cards and parcels, and the delight of treasures discovered in their stockings. Thence they invaded the nursery, whence they were ejected with contumely, and so they pervaded the house, wishing everybody a

merry Christmas, kissing the laughing maids under the mistletoe, teasing the men and hindering them in forlorn attempts to hew paths through the frozen drift, small spirits of innocent riot, whom nobody could seriously rebuke, least of all on Christmas Day, the children's day.

When Cecil, careworn and hollow-eyed, came down that morning, the first sight that met his eyes was the pleasant one of Cynthia, with the freshness of morning in her face and the sparkle of the exhilarating air in her eyes, standing at the hall-window, whence the Christmas firelight had streamed the night before, with her little brothers clinging to her, both talking at once.

‘You did well to come home last night, Cecil,’ she said ; ‘the roads will be blocked to-day. But it must have been bitter work riding through that storm. And you look so tired!’—this with tenderest compassion.

‘Bitter to sweet end,’ he replied, his face brightening all over at the tenderness

in the sweet voice, though his breath caught in a sigh as he went on ; ' I am all right, being as hard as nails. But this vast whiteness is frightfully depressing. Nobody over ten likes snow.'

' Oh, but I love it! Yet it is, not exactly sad, but most solemn—a purity that inspires awe.'

Lady Susan, who had come up, agreed with her favourite as usual. ' Yet it must always be in a measure sad to people who have seen many winters,' she added ; ' it means so much suffering. Presently we shall hear of sheep being dug out, frozen to death. And the poor birds! But the drift is lovely. What graceful shapes !'

' That under the firs is so curious,' Cynthia added. ' What is it like? A statue just beginning to take shape in the block, roughly but accurately sketched.'

The outlines were really quite human, they all agreed, and the boys disputed if it were a woman or a man as they went dancing in to breakfast. But none of

them dreamed of the tragic secret shrouded in the white drift.

The capricious storm had poured the drift over the porch in a cascade that roofed it and fell over upon the lee-side; the steps were buried deep, but the lie of the land was such that the greater part of the carriage-drive was swept to a soft thin carpet, pleasant to walk on.

After breakfast the belated and welcome postman reported the way practicable though difficult, and a pioneering party, including the two boys, having been sent on with shovels, the family started in a body for the church, which was about half a mile distant.

The melody of the bells, those eight clear-toned Cottesloe bells, of which the Marlowes as well as the villagers were so proud, filled the keen, exhilarating air; the snow sparkled in the frosty sunshine and made its peculiar indescribable sound, which is neither the English crunch nor the French *crier*, beneath their feet; the motionless trees, here bowed by great masses of drift,

and there bearing foliage of soft fleece on every bough, the strange carvings and flutings and delicate feather-and-leaf-work cut with pure azure shadows in the white drift, were so beautiful; the white campaign contrasted with dark houses and trees, the half-buried village with ivied tower and purple smoke-spires, the long shadows and the dim blue horizon, were so bright, still and serene, that it was impossible not be cheered and uplifted in heart while stepping briskly along in the cloudless morning. The boys were like colts; Dick and his father merry; Cynthia was in what Lady Susan called one of her wild moods; even Cecil's heavy heart shook off its load, and his brow cleared as they set forth, passing within a stone's-throw of the silver firs and the strangely sculptured drift.

‘The upper part is the best defined,’ Cynthia commented in passing; ‘I wonder if sculptors work in that way, from the head downwards.’

‘It reminds me of that prince in the

“Arabian Nights,”’ Lady Susan added; ‘from the waist downwards he was marble beneath his robes, and no one knew why he never moved.’

Cecil touched it as he passed, and Cynthia’s dress brushed it; the children’s laughter eddied round it, and the General plunged his stick into the outer part of it to measure its depth.

‘It’s ve first time all my life long I ever digged myself to church,’ cried Hugh, shouldering his little spade, and dancing backwards into a snow-wreath, whence he was not extracted without much mirth and involving others in his fall. Cynthia was still child enough to enter into the spirit of the boys’ fun, and laughed pitilessly when, as they went through the gate, the General, after slyly returning a snowball she pretended to have given him by mistake, put on his severest face, and crying, ‘No more skylarking now, boys!’ was silenced by the sudden plumping down of a mass of snow from the trees on his tall hat, which was ignominiously crushed over his nose.

‘My *dear* Cynthia!’ expostulated Lady Susan at last, when the united efforts of the family had extricated the head and restored something of its pristine shape to the hat; but Cynthia’s laughter, which was one of her charms, continued to ring out with inextinguishable, helpless joyousness, as if a fountain of mirth within her had bubbled over, and rose up with more strength the more it was suppressed. It was the pure heart-whole laughter of a child; it seemed an echo of those clear-toned bells pealing from the tower; it deepened the healthy colour in her cheek and lips, and increased the lustre of her eyes. But it made Cecil sad.

‘Let her laugh,’ the General said, himself bubbling over for pure sympathy; ‘no woman out of her teens laughs like that!’

Cecil could not but smile for all his sickness of heart; he asked himself if she would ever again laugh like that, as they turned and entered the village, where lads were busy clearing the road, indulging in rough play and homely jokes, and being

well pelted by small urchins ; where sprigs of holly gleamed in cottage windows and people were digging out paths and clearing drifts from blocked windows on one side of the road, the other being free ; where the dignified housekeeper from Cottesloe was sitting helpless and mournful in the middle of the trodden, slippery road, and other worthy folk were seen to be surprised by snow-blocks from invisible shovels and avalanches from unnoticed trees ; where meetings were taking place and disasters being recounted, and the Cottesloe party saluted on every hand ; where the forge was aglow and the anvil mingling its workaday clink with the Sunday sound of bells because of those frisky horses waiting outside to be roughed ; where concertinas were being played at cottage doors, mistletoe was worn, and flushed housewives were preparing Christmas dinners, much embarrassed by the general blockade of outhouses ; and where the unaccustomed music of sledge-bells suddenly arose and drew every creature, cats and

dogs not excepted, out to look at George Copley driving a pair of bright-maned chestnuts in a gaily ornamented sledge up to the churchyard-gate.

‘Come on, mates,’ cried Bob Ryall, stopping at a half-buried cottage, whence no smoke issued, and beginning to work with his shovel ; ‘who’s a-going sneaking up the backstairs to heaven while poor old Granny Baker’s snowed up ?’

‘Not Bob,’ commented General Marlowe. ‘If any man is let in without question at the front gate, ’twill be he. Now, Cynthia, if I see you giving away any more half-crowns, I shall issue a warrant against you for corrupting the village. As for my lady, she’s past praying for.’

It was a merry walk ; the two boys could scarcely calm down into decent composure inside the church, where the scent of evergreens and the shining red berries gave them a vague sense of relaxed discipline. Cecil looked from Cynthia’s innocently sparkling face to their round cheeks, glowing above their

round white collars, and long dormant chords, still further vibrated by the Christmas hymns and lessons, were touched within him.

He remembered that, not so very many years ago, he and Dick had been just such a rollicking pair as those lads; he remembered that a child had been born to him, and might, for all he knew, still be alive. All through the sermon he pondered upon ways of communicating with his wife, especially respecting this little child. He could not advertise, because of the publicity; the only feasible plan seemed to be to write to the K rouacs or the Orleans schoolmistress. A good thought had come to him in the night. His wife knew his full name at the date of his marriage, and had remarked upon his abbreviated signature: this knowledge would make a marriage void in English law; but French marriages are so terribly secure. As he made these pious reflections, his eyes rested upon Cynthia's innocent face, composed now to proper

gravity and reverence, when the contrast between her probable devout thoughts and his profane ones, together with the idea of what she would think if she knew that her affianced husband was planning how to get rid of a wife before marrying her, seemed so fiendishly grotesque that he nearly burst into a wild roar of wicked laughter.

The two young men took the boys home when the congregation divided in the Communion service. Then they yielded to the children's entreaties to help make a suggestive piece of drifted snow into a regular fortification all ready for a snow-ball fight. It would be great fun, the little rogues thought, to shell the remainder of the party on their return from church from behind these bastions. Bob Ryall was easily pressed into the service, being always available for anything that needed a helping hand and having no exact duties of his own, beyond a general devotion to Cecil, whose part in the snow-works was chiefly that of adviser.

The business went merrily on, Richard and Bob, with their coats off, working hard with shovels, while Cecil, having lighted a cigar, stood in the porch and directed them, thinking of far different things and looking indifferently at the singular snowdrift, unconscious of the agony hushed beneath it, unconscious of the answer it contained to his ever-vexing problems. The sun drew keen little sparkles from the snow whenever it struck the angle of a crystal or a feathered bough, and here and there it was warm enough to produce icicles frozen before they grew long. The group of silver firs was especially rich in sparkle—a lovely thing traced in black and silver upon the singularly pure blue of a winter noon sky.

Cecil's glance rested wistfully upon it; natural beauty had lost its charm in the misery that gnawed at his heart. Even if he succeeded in gaining the divorce, how keep the marriage from Cynthia's knowledge? She would never marry a divorced man, however innocent, nor would she ever

condone his denial of his wife—nor would his mother. It must never come to their knowledge. He stood above a volcano that might at any moment break out beneath his feet.

‘Come, Cis, lend a hand!’ cried Marmaduke, filling his tall Sunday hat with snow, and using it as a hod.

Cecil stepped forth to rescue the hat and send the boy in for a more suitable one.

‘Don’t touch this drift again,’ he added, going up to the silver firs; ‘it is too pretty to be spoilt.’

But he suddenly stopped in the act of smoothing over the hollow scooped by Marmie’s destructive hand — his breath stopped; his heart stopped; his eyes were fixed stonily. Was it the blinding glare of sunlight upon the snow? Was it a delusion? He held his hand before his closed eyes for a moment, and then looked again. It was no delusion, but the sharp flash of silver in the sunshine.

He brushed the snow hastily away, and

disclosed something black, on which the bright silver glittered—the bright silver image of a crucified man. He knew it at once, recognised the delicate artistic modelling, the graceful droop of the dying head—he had chosen it for its beauty as a suitable gift for his wife. He took it in a shaking hand; the soft snow yielded; the chaplet was easily detached from its bed. The silver links quivered like living things in that shaking clasp—quivered and became suddenly tense, held firmly by something beneath the snow.

Was it another hand? A nameless horror clutched at his heart; great drops started on his forehead; the blood beat furiously in his temples; the pure, cold snowdrift looked of a burning crimson and wavered before his eyes, so that it was some moments before he could discern the ivory white of a rigid hand bedded in the purer white of the snow—the hand linked to his not only by prayers and the sign of salvation, but by the golden fetters of marriage. It seemed as if he must send forth the shrill

cry that rose in his quivering throat. Shuddering from head to foot, he kept it in, biting his trembling underlip till the blood came and fell, staining the snow with two drops like crimson tears.

There was no doubt of the identity of that waxen hand still wearing the marriage ring he had placed upon it. A thousand thoughts, memories, and reassuring decisions flashed through his brain while he kept back the loud and piercing cry that was struggling in his throat. First and foremost came the distinct assurance that this time there could be no mistake about the breaking of his chains—she was really dead. Next he thought that this was his very wife frozen to death at his father's door—she who kindled his fancy, charmed his senses and touched his heart for awhile, embodying the beauty, the pathos and the poetry of a whole class; she whose tender and devoted cares soothed his sufferings and rescued him from death, who had been a blameless and devoted wife to him, who had left more than home and country for his

sake, and who, neglected and alone, in the full blossom of her youth and beauty, had yet kept herself above reproach. Swift conjectures as to the exact manner of her death, the meaning of her being there, and the effect the tragedy might produce on others arose in the brief moment, during which he kept back his emotion, heard the voices of the two men and boys and the rustle and thud of the shovelled snow, remembered how soon the church party would return, hardened his heart, and decided what to do.

‘Bob!’ he called in an undertone, with a subdued urgency his devoted henchman could not mistake.

‘Sir,’ replied Bob, coming quickly at the call, startled by the gray rigidity of the face and the blood on the lip.

‘Hush, keep shovelling!’ Cecil said, looking round and finding that the sport had carried Dick and Hugh to the other side of the porch, facing away from him.

‘Certainly, sir,’ murmured Bob, busily shovelling, with one eye on his master

and the other on the treasure he had found in the drift.

‘*You made the discovery,*’ continued Cecil, resolutely pointing to the rigid hand, at sight of which Bob’s blood ran, as he said afterwards, the wrong way. ‘*You called my attention to it, and told me to tell the Captain and get the boys out of the way while you went further.*’

‘Very good, sir,’ replied Bob, taking the crucifix from him, his own rough hand shaking, and his square forehead beaded with wet.

‘For God’s sake, Bob!’ Cecil whispered imploringly, and yet with that masterful tone so new in him, seeing the man’s emotion.

‘Yes, sir, and for yourn, trust me.’

Cecil then hurried from him, just in time to stop Marmie, who came bounding out of the house, and send him off on an improvised errand, whither he also despatched little Hugh as soon as he came up with him.

‘Do let the boys finish——’ Dick was

beginning impatiently, when he looked up from his work into his brother's face. 'Good heavens, Cecil! what's up?' he cried.

'Those children must be kept out of the way,' stammered Cecil. 'I'll manage them if you'll go to Bob. There's something horrible—Bob was shocked—called me. There's a poor—a poor—creature—frozen!' the last word in a loud, shrill tone, almost a shriek.

By this time Richard had turned and seen Bob uncovering something dark beneath the firs, and the whole thing became clear to him.

'By George! at our very door!' he gasped. 'All right; manage the children, and keep the women away. And look here: send somebody for a policeman and a doctor, and tell him to shut his mouth. And mind somebody meets the church people.'

Dick was shocked on going up to the firs to find Bob gently removing the snow from the pale face and thick black hair of

a young and comely woman ; but he had seen death too often and in too many painful forms to be overcome by this sad sight. He was a little contemptuous of his brother's strong emotion — just like a civilian and bookish man with nerves, he thought. But when he observed Bob's blanched face and shaking hands, his patience gave way, and he angrily found fault with him for a chicken-hearted, white-livered — something uncomplimentary—becoming more and more pungent in his epithets as the complete unveiling of the pale young face, with its long black eyelashes closed in apparent sleep, convinced him that it would take but little more to betray him into some weakness.

But Bob scarcely heard these opprobrious epithets ; his brain had only room for one thought, 'That it should be Mr. Cecil !' He continued to remove the snow, seeing distinctly traced on it and above the dead face the unfamiliar countenance and alien glance, so unexpectedly shown by the master he idolized ;

his features truly, but stamped with another soul.

Cynthia's innocent joyousness had been chastened and deepened by the solemn rites in which she had borne a part; she returned homewards in a thoughtful mood, her wild spirits tamed. The shy curate had been annexed by the Marlowes, together with two other forlorn solitaires living in the village, for luncheon; there was much talk of parish festivities and charities, and also of the dance to take place on the morrow at the Grange. Whether people would be able to come in such weather was seriously debated on the way home. The Copleys could use their sledge at a pinch; the General had some idea of putting sledge-irons on one of his carriages for his village guests. Cynthia heard these things without heeding, musing upon the alteration in Cecil since the morning of the skating: he now almost avoided her, was grave and pre-occupied and had a singularly tired, strained look in his eyes. Were men

always like this, ardent while wooing, cold and disenchanted having won? And yet she remembered the kiss in the hall the night before—the hesitation and almost reluctance with which it was offered, the burning intensity with which it was given; it seemed by this that he feared his own ardour, but why? That was like a girl, most unlike Cecil. There had been something terrifying, almost repellent, in him during the last two days, a subtle meaning behind the surface meaning of his look and words, infinitely disquieting. Why had he turned his back on the Holy Table, especially on Christmas Day? She knew that was not his custom. Was he ill? Or was she a foolish, fanciful girl, magnifying trifles, ignorant of the due proportions of things? Perhaps, after all, it was in the nature of human affairs that what one has is never as beautiful as what one hopes to have, since Cecil betrothed was no longer the Cecil who for so long had been silently sighing for her. Farewell youth and illusion! one must be serious and

perhaps a little sad on approaching the ripe age of twenty-one. Wise Thomas à Kempis! who bids us be content with little and seek nothing we have not.

Yet the sun was shining as brightly as ever, and the Cottlesloe bells had burst out into full music once more, after the service; people were talking and laughing near her, and here was Cecil himself emerging from the bend of the drive, where it passed under the shadow of trees in turning to sweep up to the porch.

‘Don’t go on,’ he said, on coming up to them; ‘wait a little. I wish you could go round by the terrace, but it is blocked by drift. Why? There is a sad scene at the house. The ladies might be startled. I came to warn them.’ They all grouped round him at this, curious rather than startled; for he spoke so tranquilly and with a face so composed that only Cynthia detected something unspoken behind.

‘Pray spare our nerves,’ his mother replied lightly. ‘Don’t put us to the torture of having things gently broken.

Is the kitchen chimney on fire, or have the water-pipes burst ?'

'No,' he replied ; ' there is something at our door that will shock and pain you.'

Then he took his father aside and began telling him, at the same time moving on, accompanied by the whole group, none of whom were much interested, except Cynthia. In a few moments they were in view of the clump of firs, beneath which several men were bending over something.

At sight of this, Cynthia gave a short, sharp cry. ' It was a human being !' she cried, darting forwards ; ' and we were laughing !'

The doctor had arrived and a country policeman ; all the men-servants and most of the maids had gathered round. They had completely uncovered the upper part of the rigid figure standing with its pale, sleeping face turned to the hall-window, and were now removing the snow from the feet. Cecil, coming up with the others, a little in the rear, now looked for the first time upon the face of his

dead wife. No one looked on his except Bob Ryall, who gave one furtive, terrified glance, and then turned to his work again, sick at heart.

‘Hours and hours,’ the doctor was saying. ‘She must have died long before the drift covered her, probably bewildered and exhausted by the storm.’

‘Should have stood in the lewth,’ added the policeman; ‘must have been dazed to stand to wind’ard.’

‘Oh!’ cried Cynthia, her every word quivering like an arrow in Cecil’s heart, ‘she was mad, mad! It is the poor girl who came on the ice. She must have been wandering out in the snow while we were sitting warm by the hall-fire. She must have seen us—dear God! and we so happy! She must have heard our voices singing and laughing! Oh, Cecil!’ she cried from the depths of her warm young heart; but Cecil stood mute and frozen, his face screened by his hand, and a shade paler than before.

‘Take her away, Cecil, take her away,’

whispered his father, 'the women will all be in hysterics.'

But Cecil seemed turned to stone. He made neither movement nor reply. His countenance was the only one expressive of neither pity nor horror of all those gathered about that pale, unconscious face on which some flakes of snow yet lingered.

'I wonder,' he said very slowly at last, when they were bearing her into the house, whence his father was too hospitable to turn even the corpse of a nameless stranger—'I wonder if this poor young woman had any friends?'

CHAPTER X.

BOXING NIGHT.

THE cottage of Christopher Niblett, the Cottesloe carrier, stood upon a high bank at the entrance to the village, almost opposite the gate of Cottesloe Grange. A large ancient yew, with gnarled red trunk, spread its sable blackness over the little green in front, and made the warm, weathered brick wall and steep roof of yellow-crustrated brown tiles look all the warmer by contrast, besides forming a delightful shelter from sun and rain for those who sat on the bench beneath it to smoke contemplative pipes or stitch leisurely needlework, while looking down on the village and across the Cottesloe beeches and oaks.

On this bitter cold Boxing Night the bench was buried in snow and half the tree was white with it; the other half loomed blacker than ever in the pale snow-gleam and showed the keen twinkle of frosty stars between its topmost boughs. The cottage roof was white, and every salient ridge and coign of the brick front was traced in white fleece. A golden rod of light from the closed window-shutters made the snowy window-ledge and the snow-laden shrubs beneath sparkle, else all was dark.

But it was bright and cosy within : the china dogs and brass candlesticks above the chimney-piece were decked with red-berried holly ; a mistletoe bough hung from the low ceiling ; the plates ranged on the wooden dresser brought into relief dark yew sprays and shining holly ; a splendid coal fire crackled in the grate, whence rose the odour of roasting chestnuts, and where a kettle sang cheerily on the hob ; two candles gave light enough to the fire-lit room, with its reflecting crockery and

bright metal vessels on the walls. Bottles and glasses, a pile of oranges, a couple of lemons, a large plum-cake, and a basin of sugar, stood on a table which had been pushed up under the window to make room for the company with which the room was filled, literally filled, so that one or two of the younger guests had to stand, and broad hints were made as to the expediency of certain ladies sitting on the knees of certain gentlemen.

‘I should like to catch myself indeed!’ said pretty Mary Niblett, tossing her head at the fifth hint from Ben Carter, the carpenter’s eldest son.

‘Better let me ketch you, Mayery, my dear,’ he returned unabashed, with a glance at the mistletoe above his curly head; ‘I haven’t had a proper chance this Christmas.’

‘Ketch a weasel asleep, Ben,’ said Wace, the clerk, drawing his bow across the violin he held lovingly under his chin with a sentimental droop of his grizzled head; ‘but you don’t ketch our Mayery

trippen. You'll ketch more'n you bargain for, I'll war'nt, if you don't mind.'

'Hev patience, Ben,' said Christopher Niblett very wisely.

'I'd sooner hev Mayery,' sighed Ben very naturally.

'Ha-ha! Patience is a wold maid, and a ter'ble onlucky one,' said the clerk, beginning to play 'Flow on, thou shining river'; 'and so'll Mayery be ef she don't mind.'

'Anybody had need hev patience for my day's work,' continued Ben; 'I allows I never had a wuss mind to making of a cawfen all my life, and Christmas time too.'

'To be sure,' added his mother, ''twas enough to turn anybody's blood to hear the knock, knocken all day long and think who't was meant fur. And not a soul to lay claim to her, poor thing!'

'I seen her,' said Christopher suddenly; 'leastways I 'lows 'twas she, day afore Christmas Eve. Her tongue was all twisted like a Frenchy's: she couldn't say

hroäd no zense—"ru-rur-roäd," she says, and talks that vine, viner than our laädies talks, as though she'd cut the carners off of her words. Ast me the hroäd to Cawtesloe. And ef there wasn't Cawtesloe a-staren of her in the vaäce !

'I minds when vather come home with the caiert, that night,' added Mrs. Niblett. 'After he'd a-hracked up and come in and set down to's tea, a said, "Mother," a said, "wold Gentle picked up a stoän and pretty nigh come down, and there's a French 'ooman gone up Cawtesloe," a said, "and darned if I hain't forgot they plums vur Granny Baker." 'Taint vurry often vather forgets ar a passel. And I ses to en, "How do ee know 'tis a French 'ooman, vather?" "Wull, thayer," a said, "if she ain't French she's craäzy, vur she couldn't make out haäffe o' what I sed, and I speaks as plain as any man I knows; nor she couldn't tell Cawtesloe when't wus a-staren of her in the vaäce," a zed.'

'She was crazy and she was French,' Mary Niblett added; 'I see her running

up to her la'ship and all the family on the pond, talking nonsense as though she was out of her mind.'

'Well, thayer, it entirely beats me how ever a French 'ooman can goo craäzy,' her father said; 'they be bound to be so ter'ble shaerp to make out that there lingo of theirn. 'Taint as though they could speak plain English now and agen. Whatever they've a got to zay, they be fosed to jabber that ar vullish stuff' or else bide quiet.'

'Wull, thayer, vather,' said Mrs. Niblett, 'if that ain't fit to wear out anybody's brains avore a week was out. I 'lows me an' you'd pretty soon be carr'd off to 'sylum if we'd a-got to spake Vrench or else bide quiet.'

'No vear; nothen wouldn't make mother bide quiet, shart of heving of her tongue tied up, I'll war'nt.'

'Some says one thing, and some says another,' said Giles Stone, the gardener; 'but you may lay what you like there's summat behind.'

‘Something ’ll come out at the inquest, I’ll warrant,’ added Wace; ‘there’s more than anybody knows. There was foul play somewhere, you may lay yer life.’

‘No voilence,’ said Ben, still wistfully regarding the mistletoe bough and Mary’s face in turn.

‘What’s voilence?’ returned Wace—‘voilence is clumsy work at best. Gentry knows better than that. How ever did she come to be in that there drift? When you tells me that you may talk about voilence.’

‘Wull, she come there somehow or ’nother, that’s so plain as the back o’ my hand,’ replied Christopher, with a puzzled contraction on his lined and ruddy countenance, which was framed in grizzled whisker and stiff gray hair.

‘’Tis pretty nigh so plain as yer vaäce, Christopher,’ retorted Wace, whose own quaint and angular features had even less claim to beauty than his host’s.

‘You may lay whatever you like she never went there of her good will,’ added Giles Stone. ‘Nobody in their hright

senses, let alone a lady, 'd stand still in a storm outside of a door. Somebody 've got summat to answer for ; them Marlowes was always wild uns.'

'Right—you're right there,' Mrs. Niblett struck in. 'Many a time her la'ship hev said to me, "Who've got buoys hev got trouble ; you may be thankful yourn 's maids, Mrs. Niblett." And thankful I be. Maids is tarment enough for me. Come on, vather, do ! Here's nobody a taken of nothen,' she added, giving him a vigorous thump in the ribs ; 'anybody'd think there wasn't nothen for nobody to taäke. Hreach me the kittle, Mayery. Slice up the lemon, Jane. There's Ben Carter 'll zing us a zong so soon as his inside's comforted, I'll war'nt.'

'Singing birds must be heartened up,' commented Wace, drawing out a soft strain of 'Cherry Ripe' with a light touch on his violin ; 'wun't sing without.'

'Why, whatever's come of Mayery?' added her mother, looking round in vain for the bright eyes and rosy cheeks of her

eldest girl, who was also a guest, being on a holiday from her town situation. But no Mary being visible, the good woman was fain to fetch the kettle and help compound the comforting, song - inspiring draughts with her own red and capable hands.

Ben Carter looked very black, the other young people tittered and nudged each other, Wace broke out into the full strains of 'Cherry Ripe,' when a new face appeared in the doorway, and Bob Ryall, his ruddy cheeks freshened by the frosty air, his curly hair well oiled and brushed, his black cloth suit glossy as a raven's wing, mistletoe in his coat, and his collar rivaling the snowdrift, entered with a smile and a blithe 'Good-evening, ladies and gents: a merry Christmas and a happy New Year, a pocket full of money and a mug of good beer'—followed by Mary, smiling and blushing, re-arranging her ribbons, and not without some anxiety lest Mr. Ryall's effusive private greeting at the door should have been overheard by the company, whose faces brightened at the sight of a favourite.

‘Evenen, Mr. Ryall. Glad to see ye, though late ye be,’ said the carrier. ‘We’ve a-done tea. What’ll ye taäke, sir?’

‘Thank ee kindly, Mr. Niblett, sir,’ returned Bob, cheerfully winding his arm round Mrs. Niblett’s ample waist, and suiting the action to the word, ‘I’ll take a kiss, sir, since you’re so pressing.’

A shout of laughter from the company, with a friendly cuff from Mrs. Niblett, was followed by the latter’s rebuke :

‘You’re fash’nable to-night, Mr. Ryall ; that’s London ways, I ’low. A hour after invited, Mayery says.’

‘London pride, Bob,’ added Giles Stone ; ‘that’s a pretty vlower for edgen. ’Taint much of a one fur to give to anybody’s sweetheart.’

‘Right you are, sir ; lad’s love’s the flower fur to give to a sweetheart, and forget-me-not’s another. You see, Mrs. Niblett, ma’am, what with being bashful at the thought of so much company, and what with being stuck in the drift five

times running, I thought I should never have got here at all without leaving half of myself behind, and if I ain't as welcome to myself as flowers in May, it's no credit to me, ma'am, though I say it as shouldn't.'

Mr. Ryall's arrival was to the party like sunshine in harvest ; the festivities, which had shown signs of languor before, now revived and began in earnest. He had a quip for everybody, and a variety of diverting accomplishments which he cheerfully exhibited for the general entertainment, so that others, each in his degree, were inspirited to contribute to the same.

Ben Carter, duly comforted internally, boomed out 'The Village Blacksmith,' and Giles Stone, who was six feet high, warbled in plaintive falsetto, 'The little one who died.' Another big fellow wailed 'Oh, my darling Nellie Gray, I am weeping all the day' most lugubriously, the company joining in the chorus with rapturous melancholy.

When things dragged, Bob sang comic

songs, imitated the sounds in a farmyard, or showed unmarried women their future husbands' faces in a pail of water in the back kitchen, to the infinite disgust of Ben Carter, who resolutely abstained from smiling, either at Ryall's jokes or his songs, and openly wondered, when the latter swallowed knives and made oranges appear in unexpected places, that any grown man could 'act so silly.'

One thing Bob would not do—namely, suffer the conversation to fall on the tragic discovery at Cottesloe. What was there to wonder at in a poor wandering madwoman being frozen in the snow? he said, dismissing the subject. As for being outside General Marlowe's door, it was trouble enough *he* had that night in finding Christopher Niblett's in his right senses with the stars shining clear overhead. If anybody had anything to say against any of the Marlowe family, only let him take his coat off and step outside for a minute, and Robert Ryall would be happy to oblige him to the best of his ability.

‘Well, to be sure, Mr. Ryall, you do stand up for the vam’ly,’ Wace commented; ‘and, come to think on’t, you’re beholden to them. I mind the day I vust seen you, a poor bit of a nipper as white as a surplice, carried on Mr. Cecil’s back.’

‘You may depend upon it, Mr. Wace, I mind that day,’ Bob replied; ‘and if your memory serves you, sir, you’ll mind that Mr. Cecil was covered with blood and ready to drop.’

‘I mind a was but a buoy, half knit, and thin as a hrake, but as gaäme a lad as ever I see.’

‘Let’s year how it all come about,’ said Christopher; ‘you was boughten, I’ve yeard zaäy. Vill glasses and pipes, maätes, and Robert Ryall ’ll tell us how he was come by for a Christmas taäle.’

‘’Tain’t much in the telling,’ Bob replied; ‘but if the company’s agreeable, sir, here goes, short and sweet, as the man said when he asked the hangman to look sharp with the drop. I lived with

an uncle when left an orphan at ten, and he wasn't so obliging as the gentleman at the sign of the three balls by a long shot. I ran wild, and many a time I turned a penny turning wheels and walking on my hands. One day Tim Stanley, the gipsy-tinker, saw me; he wanted a boy to knock about when drunk, which was mostly, and to carry things for him when lazy, which was always. So he bought me off my uncle for five shillings, and glad I was to get away from my affectionate relation, and walk the country with Tim and Madge his wife. Not that Tim had married her, though he couldn't have knocked her about more than he did if he'd been her lawful husband, and never a married wife could have stuck to him and done for him and taken his swearing and beating better than poor Madge. She was good to me, and many a black eye she's got coming between me and Tim. Tim was in his prime strength, a big, black-avised chap over thirty, and he hit hard, especially when drunk, which was mostly. She was

young and pretty, and the Lord only knows what she saw in that black-browed brute.

‘I went along with them for about a year, and many a time I would have run away but for Madge and the baby that came soon after Tim bought me; for Tim swore at me and knocked me about more and more every day, though I served him well and earned money for him. Well, one hot September morning I felt that bad I could hardly crawl, and was only got along by Tim’s stick, just as you may see a foundered horse flogged till it drops. Presently, in Millwood Lane, which all the company knows has high banks with trees meeting overhead, down I went, and thinks I, “This is the last end of poor Bob Ryall.” Then Tim was at me again, and I only hoped he’d make a quick end of me. Poor Madge stood up for me as usual. “Let him be, Tim,” she said; “can’t you see the boy’s as bad as he can be, and dead beat?”

‘Then Tim swore at her—Lord, how

that beast could swear!—and knocked her down; the baby flew out of her arms like a ramrod out of a gun. Before poor Madge could pick herself up, the brute was at me again, when all of a sudden down comes a voice from above, “Let that boy alone, or I’ll make you!” and Tim held off, taken by surprise, and looked up and said something nasty and at me again. Then I heard a crunch on the road, and down dropped, as if out of the sky, a fine slim young gentleman, with great black blazing eyes. Without another word he went at Tim and knocked him over as clean as a whistle. You should have heard that big black-faced beast swear and say he’d have the law of him and damages, but he didn’t hit him back. Then Mr. Cecil, after knocking Tim down, asked him what he meant by it, and if he was my father, and where he came from; and Tim said I was lazy and shamming, and nothing but stick would move me (which was true), and he’d bought me, same as he’d bought poor Madge (he gave a sovereign for her at a fair),

and a man could do what he liked with his own. Then Mr. Cecil offered half a sovereign to buy me, and Tim said it wasn't enough, though it was little good a measly sick boy was to anybody.

“Look here, my young cockerel,” he said, “you shall fight for the nipper. If you knocks me out o’ time, you gets him and I gets the half-quid. If I knocks you out o’ time, you pays the money and asks no questions.”

“Right,” says Mr. Cecil, taking off his coat and waistcoat and rolling up his sleeves. You should have seen that young gentleman go to work! I was that bad I didn’t care whether Tim lathered me or not; the harder he hit the sooner ’twould be over, I thought, and the sooner the better. But to see the style in which Mr. Cecil went to work was enough to put life into a dead donkey. For he was like a lath, grown to his full height, but with no substance in him, and with a face as red and white and smooth as a girl’s. But, Lord! how he pitched into

that big beast of a tinker ! He was everywhere at once ; Tim couldn't get at him anyhow. Mr. Cecil, you see, had the science, and he's that sort his blood boils when he sees cruelty. The ladies wouldn't understand the ins and outs of that fight, and 'twould be a long story ; but, there, that big black beast was too heavy for a slip of a lad in his teens, so Mr. Cecil was done at last, and Madge could hardly get him round with water from the ditch.

‘ But as soon as he came round again, and had cleaned some of the blood off, he handed the half-sovereign to Tim and wanted to fight again. Tim laughed, and said if he wanted punishment there was plenty more at the same shop. Madge told the young gentleman he'd better be satisfied with being half killed ; but no half-measures for Mr. Cecil. So they had another round, and, though Tim was prepared this time, his heart wasn't in the job like my young master's, and he'd been on the drink for days and had no staying power. Mr. Cecil had

a kind of deadly look in his eye when he stood up to Tim that last time; he knew his man by then, and he punished him well. Tim lost his head and hit wild, and presently the brute was lying flat, with all the wind knocked out of him. Jiminy, wasn't I glad! Tim had had two good half-sovereigns and two first-rate fights, and he might have been content, but not he. "I ain't a-going to dance upon nothing for a chap like you!" says he, only he didn't say chap, and there was ornaments for every word that came out of his mouth that would put the ladies to the blush; "but a fine hearty boy of twelve is worth more than a quid, if only for the fun of leathering him." Then Mr. Cecil took out ten shillings in silver. "This is every blessed penny I've got," says he. "But when you get to that oak with all your traps, and promise honour bright you'll leave me and the boy, you shall have it."

'So it was done, and he bought me for thirty pieces of silver, the same as Judas

sold his Master for. Then he came and looked at me, and spoke kind and soft like a woman, and put something under my head to rest it, and you may think if I was glad. When he had got his wind he took me on his back and carried me off, I crying like a child to think I should die easy, after all. There was a fine set-out when her la'ship met him as she was driving along in her pony-chaise, but I don't know what was said, for I began to feel light and strange, and I thought I saw my poor mother coming down out of the sky with music and angels to take me up home. And home I went, though it was his mother and not mine that took me. Her la'ship has often told me what a turn it gave her to see him all bruised and covered with blood, and a ragged boy looking like death and out of sense on his back. "Cecil's boy" they called me, though I couldn't properly be his servant, except when he came to Cottesloe, for years. But, Lord! if it wasn't queer, when I got well and ran about doing odd jobs, not to be sworn

at and knocked about all day long, and most of the night too.—So there's the long and the short of it, ladies and gentlemen, and I don't care if I do take a glass hot, Mr. Niblett, sir, and you may think if Bob Ryall is beholden to the Marlowe family or not.'

'Sooner than be beholden to anybody, gentle or simple, a free-born Englishman 'd live on a shaving a-day and break stones,' said Ben Carter scornfully.

'Wait till you're born a orphan, Mr. Carter, sir,' returned Bob, with unabated good-humour; 'and by the time your uncle has sold you for his drink, and you've been made a football of till there isn't a inch of you without a bruise, I reckon you won't set much store on being a free-born Englishman.—Come now, Mr. Wace, let's see if you can't tickle the tune of "Rule Britannia" out of that little box of yours.'

Mr. Wace graciously complied, and the company were soon shouting that Britons never, never would be slaves, until the glasses rang, the ladies fanned them-

selves with their handkerchiefs, and the gentlemen dried their faces with theirs, and the youngest Niblett, fast asleep in Bob's arms, woke and cried.

'Bob Ryall may say what a wull,' Wace said after supper, when that popular guest was gone, 'there's summat behind. 'Tis nothen but hright vur to stand up vur the vamily. But there's summat behind.'

When Mary, carefully carrying a candle to light him down the steep path cut in the bank, had reached the wicket, Mr. Ryall blew the candle out with great discretion, and, taking her to his honest heart, kissed her many times and told her that he loved her, which she already knew. having promised to marry him in consequence.

'I love him better than all the world.' Mary said to herself with glowing cheeks, as she stood by the gate and watched him, a vague, dark figure in the pallid gleam the snowy road made in the darkness.

'And I,' Bob thought, as he turned out into the night, 'love her better than all the world, except my dear, dear master.'

CHAPTER XI.

THE IDENTIFICATION.

‘Do you think, Hugh,’ Lady Susan asked, ‘that it is right to go to so much expense, not knowing who may claim her?’

‘Suppose nobody claims her?’ added Richard, ‘then, sir, I suppose the parish would have to pay?’

‘The parish,’ replied the General, ‘shall not bury a respectable young woman, probably a lady, whose misfortunes have brought her beneath my roof.’

‘We don’t know what the poor soul may be, though she seems respectable,’ Lady Susan rejoined; ‘still, dear, hospitality scarcely requires us to bury our guests, however estimable.’

‘I beg your pardon, my lady,’ her husband returned with unusual energy; ‘besides, there is something in that poor girl’s face—— Bless my soul, what a cold I’ve got!—Those hussies never think of airing one’s handkerchiefs——’

‘There was that in her face no one can ever forget,’ added Cynthia, her eyes swimming in tears; ‘she seemed like one maddened by incredible wrong when she turned on me that day; there was a stony horror in her wild eyes——’

‘Surely,’ Cecil interposed, in his gentlest voice, ‘this sad business has been discussed to satiety. We cannot alter what has occurred.’

‘Quite so,’ General Marlowe added.— ‘My dear girls, we should apologize for speaking of such things before you. Death is death; we can neither help nor harm those who are gone. Besides, we can’t bury her till after the inquest. Why, what is this? — Good-bye to your quiet afternoon, Susan. Here comes the first batch of visitors.’

They were lingering at table after luncheon, and all turned at General Marlowe's words to look out of the window which commanded the carriage sweep. There they saw, plodding steadily up the snowy road, a shabby taxed-cart, drawn by an ungroomed, broken-down horse. A rough man of the very small farmer class drove, and by him sat an elderly woman in rusty black, with a crushed crape bonnet scarcely covering her grizzled head and a bundle in her arms.

'It's a curious thing,' Cecil commented, 'that females in that class, old or young, always carry an infant and wear a crape bonnet on festive occasions. How they contrive to keep a baby handy is a mystery I shall never solve. What the walking-cane is to the soldier, the child in arms is to the shabby female.'

By the time they had risen from table, the taxed-cart was seen jogging down the hill again, having left the woman and the bundle at the house. The General had just gone into the hall, followed by Cecil,

with whom he had requested a few minutes' private conversation. There they found the occupant of the taxed-cart with her bundle, which was now set down on a pair of small, staggering feet, and looking about with great frightened black eyes.

'You don't mind me, sir,' the woman said, addressing the General and making a curtsy. 'My name's Barnes—Sarah Barnes—Dore that was, Stephen Dore's daughter.'

'To be sure—to be sure! You married young Barnes, and went to Southford to live twenty or thirty years ago. Well, Sarah, and what can I do for you this cold day? Come to the fire. A little grandchild, eh?'

'None of mine, sir. Nobody's child, so to say. But that's neither here nor there. I come over in Mr. Wheeler's cart, sir, because I've a-yeard tell of a poor soul found here yesterday, sir——'

'Dear me, Sarah! a connection of yours?'

'Well, there's my lodger, a young furren lady, went out a Christmas Eve dinner-time and never come back, and I

thought it med be she. I've set up for two nights and I be pretty nigh weared out with the child and all cryen fit to break anybody's heart.'

They were all in the hall now, gathering round the new-comers with interest, the ladies making advances to the child, which clung to its protector's skirts, and from time to time peeped shyly round with one finger in its mouth, and then drew back again in alarm.

'Not an attractive child, poor little thing!' Lady Susan whispered, looking at it through her glasses. 'Why in the world did the woman bring the poor little heart?'

'Poor mite, it is frightened; and what wonder!' Cynthia whispered back.

Cecil heard; he was in the background in a careless, half-sitting attitude on the oak table, with one leg swinging and his hands in his pockets. As he sat he could see the window and the spot on which his wife died, as well as the whole group round the fire, the centre of which was the shabby

woman in the battered bonnet with the little sallow, elvish child. The little thing was not as daintily arrayed as English children in the same class usually are ; it lacked the roundness and pink-and-whiteness which go so far towards making the charm of fair-haired babies. It had sustained a great shock from the fire in the church, and this had made it peak and pine, giving to its sharpened features the curious aged look, so pitiful and so uncanny, peculiar to sickly infants.

Cecil turned from the solemn gaze of the great black eyes with a faint shudder. They seemed to be the eyes of Mère Kérouac asking, 'Where is my daughter?' And yet the great deep eyes were so like his own mother's. It was a marvel to him that everyone did not at once observe it.

'Did you notice anything unusual in your lodger's conduct?' the General asked, abruptly interrupting a torrent of reminiscence, reflection and irrelevant detail.

'Beyond her being furren, there wasn't much I could see. To be sure, she ate no

more than a bird, and she did seem ter'ble poor, considering her clothes and her ways. Not but what she paid in advance, as is my principles, sir, having been took in with strangers.'

'I cannot understand why she came twice to my house,' the General interrupted. 'Did she speak of us at all?'

'Well, sir, now you names it, she did. She asked me did I know a fam'ly of the name of Marlowe in these parts. "Well, there, ma'am," I sez, "'twould be a queer tale if I didn't, Cawtesloe barn as I be. Why, I've a-washed the General misself," I sez; "my fam'ly hev a-washed him furrer back than anybody can mind," I sez, "and open-handed they be, and I haven't no vault to vind with 'em nor nobody else neither——"'

'Just make a note of that, Cecil,' his father said aside, while the good woman babbled placidly on like an undammed stream. 'She returned late in the evening before Christmas Eve, Mrs. Barnes, eh? Did she say where she had been?'

‘She seemed terrible down and pretty nigh weared out when she come in, and she went off in a faint-like. I couldn’t get nothen out of her—she was sort of dazed. I made her a nice cup of tea and she come round, but she wouldn’t say nothen beyond tellen of me her name again. I couldn’t mind en, being outlandish. Nor I can’t mind en now no sense. ’Twas zummat like Rainy, but she said it that Frenchified anybody couldn’t properly ketch it. Yes, sir, she said she was a widow poorly left, and she’d come to teach French and needle-work. She was ready to do anything, and asked me if I know’d any lady wanted a maid——’

‘Strange that she should come to seek work where she was unknown!’ Lady Susan interrupted.

‘She may have had friends,’ Cecil suggested. ‘Do you remember the Bretonne maid you had when we were children? She might have been her daughter. She would have heard Annette talk of us, and describe Cottesloe; who knows?’

‘Yes; but who says this poor young woman is a Bretonne?’ asked the General.

‘Well, she seems to have been French,’ Richard put in, while Cecil used his handkerchief so as to conceal his face.

After all, why not tell the whole truth and be rid of this gnawing misery and constant terror? He had committed no crime, broken no law—only made a fool of himself by a miserable marriage. But that three years’ concealment—then the wrong to Cynthia, whose heart he had won under false pretences—how would she stand the strain of such an insult, such a deception?

But the pity of it! oh, the pity of it! when he might so easily have done differently. A few words to Renée in Breton, and some explanation to the bystanders. Then the plain truth to her in private—she was reputed dead, he had chosen another, his love for whom was too evident to his wife. Then he might have found some legal escape from this bond or—his wife’s absence and silence. Well?—

Cynthia need never have known. But he had lost his head at the critical time, and had reduced his wife to despair; perhaps suicide. There would always be one black page in his memory that he could never turn without misery. How could *he* have done this cruel thing—he who loved mercy and was pitiful to a fault? The story of *Œdipus* was, then, no fable, but an awful spiritual truth; and surely, then, human wills and human hearts are but the sport of a mocking and cynical Fate, the lust of whose cruelty is best sated by the spectacle of men compelled to do the very deeds they most abhor. Truly this is the quintessence of tragedy, a pain that nothing can match, the misery that made *Macbeth* begin to be ‘a-weary of the sun.’

He could do nothing now, it seemed, but lie and lie on consistently—a hard slavery, a cruel degradation. Many times during the miserable night he had left his bed in the fever of wretched thoughts, and looked at the group of firs showing dark

and ghostly in the dim starlight, tortured by the remembrance of the rigid figure that stood in the shadow there all the long yesternight, watching with sightless eyes, and torn by endless conjectures as to the cause of that awful vigil. How sleep with that memory beneath that roof? To leave the place without exciting dangerous surprise was impossible; to remain was horrible. He weighed again and again the consequences of speaking out: Cynthia's inevitable misery and probable estrangement, his father's scorn and possible lifelong resentment, his mother's pain, and the loss of that friendship which had been the flower of his life. And perhaps, though he did not know it, his need of Cynthia's fortune may have weighed in the scale; for with his tastes and ambitions, wealth was an absolute necessity. Domestic happiness and social consideration were indispensable to secure that mental health and serenity without which no such solid and lasting work as he contemplated can be compassed.

With the morning came scorn of the night's weakness ; but now in his father's hall, face to face with that woman, whose next word might hopelessly compromise him, his chains galled all the more because they might have been forged in vain, and because his happiness depended on a creature of such little account as this shabby woman in the crushed bonnet, or even on such as that poor little elvish child, whose solemn gaze harassed him. He was like a guilty prisoner on trial, whose only chance was lack of evidence.

‘ Before she went out,’ Mrs. Barnes continued, after infinite digression and repetition, ‘ she teared up her letters and put them behind the fire. Without she’ve a-got some in the pocket she weared away from my house, there ain’t a scrap to name her by, for I’ve a-looked through her bits.’

‘ Any photographs ?’

‘ That minds me she had one she carried in her gown and give the child to

kiss when she put it to bed. But I seen her take that out and tear it across and across when she come home that night. I can't find the bits nowhere. Very like they went into the fire along with the letters. 'Taint likely anybody 'd tear up a likeness and keep the pieces.'

'What do you make of that, Cecil?' asked the General, turning to the latter with a suddenness that startled him out of his carefully maintained composure.

'It needs no magician to interpret that, sir,' returned Cecil, smiling, and passing his handkerchief over his forehead, which was damp with heat notwithstanding the frosty weather; 'when people burn letters and destroy photographs they are not over-anxious for their friends to trace them, I fancy.'

'But why should a woman walk seven miles in a bitter snow-storm to commit suicide when she could do it as well at home? And on my threshold, of all places in the world!'

'And why did she come here the day

before?' added Richard. Both put their questions to Cecil, whose only wonder was that they did not address him openly as Prisoner at the Bar.

'What reason can be looked for in the acts of the insane?' he returned, again wiping his brow. 'I doubt if suicide was intended. It seems to have been a case of simple wandering with intent to hide. One of the first symptoms of mania is often an impulse to flight with fear of pursuit. It may have been an early stage, unsuspected by her friends. The child being with her, points to her not having been put away. She must have been flying from home—not from a house of restraint.'

'True; what a thing it is to have a lawyer in the family!' rejoined his father. 'But to come to the same place two days following?'

'You see, sir,' replied Cecil, with the dreary foreboding that all these questions would be debated over and over again in public and in the papers and the county

small-talk, 'nothing is more common than an unreasoning repetition of an unreasoned act by the insane. A habit is created and then followed. Memory and association probably act in some crazy fashion, even in disordered minds. Hallo !' he cried, shrinking in spite of himself, as the little girl, who had kept her great weird-looking eyes perpetually fixed upon him, notwithstanding the efforts of the ladies to attract her attention, having ventured slowly step by step from the shelter of Mrs. Barnes's skirts, finally reached him, and, clasping his leg with her thin arms, gravely babbled the word 'Pa-pa !'

This unwelcome baby had stirred no fatherly fibre in him ; his warmest feeling for her had been one of pity, and now the clinging touch of those thin, sallow fingers and the sound of the babbling voice evoked a repulsion that was perilously near hatred in this gentle-natured man. The sudden fiery flash of his eyes made the child's blink in a bewildered way like a startled kitten's ; its clasp relaxed and it looked

round with a sort of troubled appeal in the grave black eyes, and again murmured rather pitifully, 'Papa !'

Then he stooped, suddenly overcome by pity, and held out his hand to the tottering mite, who shrank away from him, its pinched features full of reproachful fear.

'Poor little dear !' exclaimed his mother, her beautiful, kind eyes full of tears. 'It takes every man for the father who has probably deserted it. Viens, viens, ma chérie, dis-moi, comment t'appelles-tu ?' she added, in a coaxing voice.

'Cécile,' replied the baby, slowly and seriously, as it suffered her to take it up and kiss it. Then, laying its head contentedly against her arm, the small creature gave a deep sigh, like an old, old woman whose troubles and cares are solaced at last.

But when Mrs. Barnes presently left the hall to go to the chamber in which the supposed mother lay, there was a piteous cry of 'Maman ! maman !' as the little

creature struggled from the arms in which it was cosily nestled and staggered after its protectress. Cecil then lifted it up and carried it quickly back to his mother, while the woman effected her escape ; then he followed her, himself pursued and shaken by the child's helpless wail.

His father, relying upon some occult legalizing capacity inherent to lawyers, had required his presence at the identification, and he could not well refuse it. Strange feelings came upon him when he entered the shadowed, icy room, and saw the veiled outline of the rigid form, the face still turned towards him, as if watching, the right hand raised towards the breast, the left lying outside the sheet, and still holding in its frozen grasp the rosary, which made a black stain on the whiteness. A cross of white roses and myrtle lay on the breast ; Cynthia had woven and placed it there. On the laced pillow of finest linen were scattered fragrant white flowers, for which the conservatories had been pillaged by the

women of the family. Thus their tender charity gave their unknown kinswoman funereal honours that were hers by right.

The air was faint and dizzying with heavy hot-house odours ; he staggered in it, and felt his joints loosen like wax in flame ; his face turned gray and old ; the flower-scents seemed to breathe vague reproaches in the dim, cold silence of the large guest-chamber. He had looked once upon that dead face, but he feared—how he feared!—to see it again unveiled ; he had never perceived the word of forgiveness traced for him upon the crucifix, the symbol of his own pardon on that of the world's. The last look he had seen in those veiled eyes was one of anger and hate, the last words from the frozen lips were of scorn and bitter reproach, the last touch of the rigid hand, once joined in wedlock with his, was an angry blow ; on the marble wrists were bruises made by his hands ; the cold heart, so lately throbbing with warm love for him, had been made to ache, and perhaps break, by him.

He thought of her as she appeared within his father's gates, radiant with joy at seeing him, and a deep, bitter sob rose in his throat ; but he held it in, shaken and half strangled with pain, until a small vein burst and his handkerchief was soaked with blood, but he shed no tears for her.

When his father slowly and reverently unveiled the still face, Cecil turned his own away, but he saw the meanly-clad stranger gaze upon it, with pity and awe, indeed, yet with a certain vulgar curiosity that jarred like a false note in music. He was strongly moved to come forward and say boldly : ' This is my wife—I claim my own dead ! ' but that curious look on the strange woman's face, together with an indescribable something in his father's, checked him. Then he thought of Cynthia. She was his true wife, the desire of his eyes and of his soul, who drew with irresistible magnetism body, soul and mind to herself. For her sake he would bear the burden of secrecy all his days.

The identification was not difficult ; and yet the woman remained for some minutes horror-stricken into unwonted silence. The pale face, shadowed by the splendid blackness of the hair, was indeed beautiful in its immobility, but the frozen attitude was so terrible because so life-like. What were those veiled eyes seeking beyond the left shoulder, whither the face was for ever turned ? What heart-pang was that raised right hand for ever trying to soothe ? Why was the black chaplet for ever clasped in the cold hand ?

Even when his father had carefully replaced the filmy laced kerchief over the face, that seeking, watching gaze seemed to follow Cecil, piercing to his marrow, and the icy grasp seemed to hold him for ever by the silver-linked chain he had given her as his newly-wedded wife.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CHIEF MOURNER.

No word had broken the hush of the silent room ; it was not until General Marlowe had turned the key upon his quiet and unbidden guest that Mrs. Barnes expressed her homage to the dark Presence we must all one day enter by a gush of tears, and certified the identity of her late lodger with this honoured and well-guarded guest.

The ladies of the household much wished to keep the little girl with them, at least for that night ; they could not bear to send her out in the cold again, for she looked so solemnly happy, seated on the nursery hearth-rug, unconscious

alike of her heavy loss and of the sad scene being enacted so close at hand. Cynthia gave her a doll she had just dressed for a little sister in Breton costume, long hair, *bragou-bras* and all; and this, which had excited her grave and earnest attention, the little thing held tightly clasped in her tiny thin arms, while she contemplated fair-haired, rosy Harry, who was frisking about with his bricks and steam-engines, with pleased but thoughtful interest. But Cecil represented that it would be cruel to let the child become attached to them, and estranged from her only known friend, unless they were prepared to keep her altogether. So at the closing in of dusk she was suffered to go, laden with toys and cakes, and well wrapped up from the cold.

It was an immense relief to him when the covered spring cart in which his father sent them back to Southford had nodded itself quite out of sight, and he was at last rid of the long nightmare of the child's

presence. Perhaps his brain was warped, as fine brain-stuff is by trouble, for he found himself wondering if the weird, large-eyed creature, with the old, worn face and the solemn, inscrutable gaze, were indeed a human child and not rather some changeling-imp, hobgoblin or elf, an embodiment and prophecy of disaster.

The little Forde-Cusackes came storming in soon after the child's departure, having spent the day at a house well furnished with boys and girls, full of spirits, and eager to relate the day's delights, and the next hour was given to the boys round the drawing-room fire, for they did not care to play by the hall-fire any more. Then it was time to dress and drive to the Copleys' to dine, the dance at the Grange being postponed and a small party improvised at Wolverton in its stead.

George Copley was not displeased with this opportunity of showing how perfectly he had consoled himself for Cynthia's ill-judged cruelty by the superior charms of

the tall, dark-eyed, perfectly-dressed Maude Vane, who was staying in the neighbourhood, and dowered with sixty thousand pounds and a serene consciousness of her own superiority; he was therefore in a genial mood. Cynthia, deeply stirred by the thoughts of the silent guest at the Grange, and still in the first freshness of her engagement, wore that look of subdued emotion which lends beauty to the most ordinary features: her face sparkled, her eyes were deeper and fuller of light than ever, they emitted iridescent flashes when she spoke. Cecil was very brilliant; he took more wine than usual, and was such excellent company when the ladies had left the table that no one was in a hurry to rejoin them; and when the gentlemen at last appeared, still quivering with laughter, he was equally gay and amusing, if less racy. His dark eyes blazed, his cheeks flushed, his hair was pushed off his broad forehead with a becoming negligence, impossible in these days of prison crops, and a subtler

smile than usual hovered about his firm, clean-cut lips. Everyone agreed that the evening was far above the average, which it must be owned was dull.

‘There is a good spice of devilry in Cecil, after all,’ the General confided to Dick afterwards. ‘I didn’t know he had so much go in him. He was always so bookish.’

George Copley’s old jealousy revived a little at the sight of the brilliant young couple’s perfect and, as he thought, ostentatious happiness. But he did not observe that every now and then, in sudden silences and blank moments, the light would go and leave Cecil’s eyes dull and glassy, his face would take on a gray pallor, and the fine smile quiver away from the drawn lips; then again he would fire up into sudden brilliance. Once Cynthia surprised the haunted look in his jaded eyes, and the old vague terror crept about her heart, to be chased away again by the smile that was for her alone.

Yet all the evening long he never ceased

to see the marble figure in the dim, flower-scented room, the perpetual vigilant gaze of the closed eyes and the perpetual tenacious grasp of the rigid hand on the black rosary, by which she seemed for ever to bind him to herself. If she would only lie at rest with folded hands, composed limbs, and tranquil face! But to keep that silent, icy, unrelenting watch for ever and ever was enough to drive one mad. What hostile or desperate purpose had been hers in the watch for ever petrified by death? If it was revenge, it was indeed complete. Poison such as that he suspected would scarcely be discoverable under the circumstances; besides, no one knew of that little empty phial but himself. What had she seen through the lighted hall window? Had that kiss filled up the measure of her despair? Tomorrow night might solve these awful enigmas, else they must forever remain unanswered.

Lady Susan and Mrs. Marlowe had

remained at home, the former out of respect to her unbidden guest, the latter to companion her mother-in-law's solitude. When the others came back from Wolverton it was late. The General and Richard wished Cynthia good-night in the hall and betook themselves to the smoking-room, leaving Cecil alone with her. The swinging silver lamp burned dimly; the fire had died into dull embers, glowing redly beneath the white crust of ashes.

He removed her furs silently, but with a tender care that made each touch a caress; then, taking her to his heart, he wished her good-night.

She did not reply, and he found that she was crying.

‘Cynthia, Cynthia!’ he said in a half-chiding, half-caressing voice.

‘I am so very happy,’ she faltered, ‘and the world is so very sad.’

‘My *dear!* The world is well enough; but you are tired.’

‘No, no! There is too much sorrow,

and I am always spared. That little motherless child, with the old, old, wistful face—and that poor, poor mother, distraught with wrong !’

She could not see the face bent over her, touching her hair.

‘Dear Cynthia,’ he replied in a voice that sounded strange to her, ‘this has been too much for your nerves. The wrong is only in your imagination.’

‘No ; it was in her face. I shall never forget the look she turned on me beneath the trees that day. *My* Cecil, why are not all men like you ?’

When Bob Ryall brought hot water to his master next morning, he did not, as usual, retire after drawing the curtains and putting things in order, but stood at the foot of the bed, erect and stiff.

‘Mr. Cecil, sir——’ he began, and stopped.

‘Well, Bob,’ returned Cecil uneasily.

‘There’s nothing I’m not bound to do for you, sir,’ continued Bob, while Cecil turned on his pillow, miserably conscious

that he had lost the homage of a heart still absolutely devoted to him.

‘You are the best friend I have, Bob,’ he replied wearily.

‘Certainly, sir. But when all’s said and done, false swearing’s a black thing, sir, when it don’t make no more difference than there is between fifty shilling and two pun ten, sir’

Cecil’s face darkened to a dull crimson. He had lost the faculty of distinguishing truth from falsehood, and had been weaving futile webs of deceit. He had no talent for dissimulation ; his stories did not hang together.

‘You are right,’ he replied. ‘I had forgotten. I was shocked and upset that day. I didn’t know what I was saying. Speak the truth, in Heaven’s name, and be off with you!’

‘Certainly, sir,’ returned Bob, lingering a moment, with a look that scorched into his master’s heart and said too plainly, ‘What have you done?’

It was not difficult to find a verdict of

‘Accidental death ;’ the evidence was simple and sufficient. It was remarked during the inquiry as a singular thing that a person, unknown to anyone at Cottesloe Grange, should have walked seven miles thither two days following and in such wild weather ; but, then, it was evident that the unknown foreigner was very strange and excited in manner, if not actually deranged, and it was certain that any human being standing long under those firs in the face of the drift must perish. But why did she stand there ? Why did she not knock at the door, or even stand in the porch ? She must have wandered in the storm till she was benumbed and bewildered, must have been too far gone when she reached the firs to perceive the danger of standing still at all, much less in a place so exposed ; she must have become delirious from exposure ; she evidently did not see the house. There was evidence that she was fasting, in great poverty and distress of mind, all of which would make her succumb more quickly to cold and fatigue. The

curious thing was that she was standing erect, with her face turned to the lighted hall-window, which she could not have observed. The fir-trunk might have kept her from falling, though scarcely in that upright, attentive posture.

Many people had been on the ice the day before, when she appeared in that distraught manner; but it was evident, though remarkable, that no soul there knew her. Few had seen her, and of those few only Cynthia, Lady Susan Marlowe and Mr. Copley had distinctly heard the sentence, 'I have made a mistake,' spoken quietly and slowly, as if on coming to after an access of delirium or frenzy. What she had said in her first excitement was in an unknown tongue.

All this, duly reported in the local papers, made a nine days' wonder, and gave rise to many wild and impossible stories, each contradicting the other, and all on the very best authority—stories of which the Marlowes would probably have heard nothing, even if they had not left

Cottesloe immediately after the funeral, as they did.

There was nothing to identify Renée in the scanty belongings found upon her, nor did the child's broken French babble throw light upon the mystery of her coming ; her mother's name, she said, was Renée, for thus she had chiefly heard her addressed. Renée had had neither time nor money to procure a proper outfit for herself and child, her wardrobe and all her trifling possessions having been disposed of after her supposed death. It thus came to pass that her hastily procured linen was not marked, and no books with tell-tale inscriptions were found among her effects—only, indeed, a small, new, uninscribed book of devotions. But during the inquest there was the constant possibility that some such evidence of identity might turn up, and Cecil followed each trivial detail with the expectation that his fate hung upon it and might be turned by a stray envelope or the marking of a handkerchief. His own part in the inquiry

was slight. He had merely to say that, when standing on the steps on Christmas Day, an unusual sparkle drew his attention to the snowdrift; that examination proved this to be a silver and ebony crucifix, on attempting to remove which he found it held fast by a frozen hand; and that, instantly calling his servant's attention to this, he had taken the two boys away, leaving this man and his brother Richard to investigate the matter. But, while giving this evidence tranquilly and succinctly, he was obliged to pass his handkerchief more than once over his wet forehead; and when the inquiry terminated, with all its minute examinations of clothing and painful processions to view the body and the place in which it had been found, its hearing of witnesses, its conjectures and piecing together of evidence, he felt a sudden relaxation in all his hitherto faintly quivering members—such a loosening of joints, a dimness of vision and dizziness of brain, that it required all his resolution to keep him from becoming unconscious.

Bob Ryall shook him in vain next morning, and was beginning to think that he might have taken some drug, when the great dark eyes opened and the sleeper started up. 'Oh, Bob,' he cried, 'I had a ghastly, ghastly dream! But now I am awake.'

'Certainly, sir. You've been coming it pretty strong in the reading line again, I expect. You'd best mind what you're up to with that brain of yours, or you'll be having of it go to pieces like a gun with four or five charges of powder in it, sir,' he replied. But when he got outside the door, he said to himself sorrowfully, 'It ain't the brain over-stuffed this time, Mr. Cecil, sir, it's the heart; and the Lord only knows what you've been putting into that, or if ever 'twill come clear again.'

The silver-linked chain was sundered at last; some beads of the rosary still remained clasped in the frozen hand, but the links had been cut on each side of them, so that little Cécile might retain the rosary as evidence of her identity, in case

friends should appear in answer to the advertisements describing her. But Cecil had now no fear on that score. He at once wrote to Renée's schoolmistress in answer to that lady's recent letter, repaying what she had advanced to his wife, and couching his letter in such terms as would lead her to suppose that all was well; while the Kérouacs, as he well knew, would not write for a long time, and then probably only to Orleans, since Renée could have given them no address; in no case would the advertisements reach them—in no case that human foresight could imagine.

There was a ghastly irony in the funeral honours paid to his wife. All was almost as it would have been had he acknowledged her. She was borne from a chamber in his father's house to a grave in the Marlowes' own portion of the village churchyard; standing by her open grave, he touched the cross which marked that of a baby-brother. There, in pleasant summer evenings, his mother had talked to him of the

little lost child, whose soul was far away in bliss, while his body was earth of which daisies grew ; there he had been taught to think of the mysteries of life and death and eternity ; he had loved the spot with a child's reverence ; it was sacred to a child's first acquaintance with love and loss—a link between the seen and the unseen. It was a grim triumph for Renée Marlowe.

When she was laid to her last rest, the frost was yielding to a soft south wind ; a lark sang joyously above her in the pale blue heaven, its beating wings steeped in sunlight, translucent. Her husband heard the solemn pathos of psalm and prayer, exhortation and assurance, borne far down the far ages from out of the anguish and faith of forgotten hearts, as one in a dream. His brain was filled with other sounds and other sights—Renée as he first saw her in her young, innocent comeliness by the hearth-fire, spinning and singing—dancing at the village wedding—afield, bending under

hard, man's labour ; steering the boat through the flying surf in her bridal array —when the sudden rattle and thud of hard clods flung upon the coffin, whence gleamed the gilded name of ' Renée,' made him start, and, with a low moan, cover his face with his hands.

There was no longer any secret check on mirth at Cottesloe that night ; music and laughter and the children's merry shouts rang unrestrained through the house, people lost the hushed way of talking into which they had fallen, the two boys were no longer afraid to shout along the corridors, there was no door they feared to pass. The snow had wept itself away from roofs and trees, the drifts were beginning to lose shape, waters unlocked from frost were flowing again, a gentle steady rain fell at dusk, and promised to wash the snow away.

' Your nerves dislike frost, I think,' Cynthia said to Cecil that night. ' You have not been quite yourself since that day on the ice till this evening.'

‘Oh, nerves!’ he replied, colouring ; ‘men have no business with nerves. But I confess that cold weather makes me bilious. As for snow, I should like to see no more as long as I live.’

Cynthia was silent and pensive ; she was sitting at the piano after playing, her cheek resting on one hand, and her elbow on the other.

‘Was it *only* the frost?’ she asked after awhile, in those low and liquid tones that reached the depths of his heart, ‘or did you begin to repent a little?’

He looked up in pained surprise, and caught the light with which her eyes were overflowing, then, looking down, he pressed a long and silent kiss on the hand she let him take. When he looked up again he laughed a strange little laugh.

‘Women are dear creatures,’ he said, ‘dear creatures ; but’—a deep sigh—‘they see rather too much, especially when one loves them.’

‘Then there *was* something between us,’ Cynthia reflected.

PART III.

CHAPTER I.

WEDDING BELLS.

GOLD of August filled the country—russet gold of standing corn brimming between dark hedges, paler gold of piled sheaves ‘in aisle’ on upland slopes, burning gold of sunrise and sunset, dead gold of sunbeams falling through thin gray films tempering the glow of cloudless skies, magical pale gold of harvest moonlight, touching common things with unearthly glamour and enhancing the glory of all things fair and noble.

Over the calm sea rose the broad moon, making that path of tremulous glory on moving waves that seems to ask spirits to

glide away upon it to some dim realms of ineffable beauty; over the glimmering downs it threw its quivering beams and shot them athwart the dark dense foliage of the Swanbourne trees and between the black horizontal boughs of the cedar before the open dining-room window, where they were quenched by the soft light of shaded waxlights on the table, at the foot of which Mr. Forde-Cusacke sat as master for almost the last time, a fact of which he was gloomily conscious.

‘I advise you, my dear Marlowe, as one who has known her from her cradle, to keep a tight hand upon her,’ he was saying mournfully. ‘Women are—very strangely, since they were ordained to be in subjection—wilful, most wilful; and of all her sex I fear Cynthia is the most wilful.’

‘Cynthia?’ asked the expectant bridegroom in a voice that was half a caress to the owner of the name, and half a smile at its incongruity with wilfulness.

‘Let him wait till he has been married a month,’ reflected his future stepfather-in-

law. ‘The dear girl is not devoid of good qualities,’ he continued aloud, ‘but her bringing-up has been unfortunate. Until our marriage, her mother’s sole object in life was to make the child happy; she was, therefore, thoroughly spoilt, for Mrs. Forde-Cusacke is not devoid of a weakness incident to truly feminine women—too great a readiness to yield to those to whom they are attached. For myself, I found it no easy task to perform my duty to my step-daughter; a man cannot exert that authority over another man’s daughter that he can over his own, especially with a fond mother always looking on; hence frequent conflicts between myself and Cynthia, in which, I regret to have to confess, her will has too often prevailed. My standard of parental duty is high, my sense of conjugal responsibility strong; still, I must admit that, while maintaining perfect authority over my wife and my own family, I have not succeeded in repressing my wife’s daughter’s wilfulness. I therefore warn you that you will have considerable diffi-

culty with her, and advise you, after a personal experience of many years of marriage, to assert yourself strongly in the commencement of your married life. Marriage, my dear Marlowe, is a most serious undertaking—most serious.'

Cecil sat back in his chair, holding his glass at arm's-length on the table, and, throwing up his head with a boyish gesture of delight, laughed a laugh of pure happiness.

'Thanks for your warning,' he replied gaily. 'The long and short of it is, then, that if I don't master her she will master me—eh?'

'Precisely so. Yet people rejoice at weddings!'

'Well, and why not? She is welcome to put a bit in my mouth if she likes and when she likes, which I fancy will be never.'

These revolutionary sentiments, combined with the levity with which so serious a theme as marital authority was handled, were too shocking for Mr. Forde-Cusacke

to dwell upon, so, with an air of severe resignation, he proposed an adjournment to the subjects of discussion.

‘They should toll the bells and wear black at marriages,’ he murmured; ‘why should a wedding cost as much or more than a funeral?’

Mr. Forde-Cusacke had conscientiously deferred this wedding as long as he could, not without a secret desire, which combated strongly with his feelings of propriety, that the marriage might be effected in some stolen Gretna Green fashion, so as to save him the mournful necessity of sacrificing much valuable time consecrated to the service of Humanity (always with a large H) to the frivolous occasion of a mere marriage in his family, though even in the event of such secrecy he would still, as guardian, have had much flippant signing of documents and such-like to go through. So he insisted on waiting until Cynthia came of age, an event which, since it involved inevitable festivities and legal arrangements, he thought might be

combined with the marriage, to the great saving of time and money ; besides, he knew that after she came of age he would be unable to prevent the wedding.

He had entertained the momentary intention of refusing to countenance the marriage at all, and so escaping the wedding arrangements and festivities ; but that, besides involving still more serious domestic inconvenience, in the shape of Mrs. Forde-Cusacke's revolt, would have been unusual and therefore improper. So this poor man could do nothing but submit with inward groans for some weeks to constant deprivation of his wife's services, while clothes and furniture were being bought, and all sorts of feminine fusses and social functions were being discussed and arranged and himself relegated to a position of secondary importance in his wife's mind. And as if it were not enough that his wife's levity and want of consideration for his comfort should annually result in another little Forde-Cusacke, with all the frightful inconveniences attending its advent, in addition

to that unwarrantable and selfish luxury she must needs immerse herself in 'that unfortunate young Brande's daughter's' interests and marry her with the accustomed pomp of bridesmaids and breakfasts, constantly running down to Swanbourne, until she finally dragged him and the whole family thither for the culminating series of festivities consequent on the inauspicious event, thus for a time totally neglecting his masculine and consequently larger interests and occupations. Long and arduous had been his resistance to the marriage. 'Cynthia might marry anybody,' he maintained, 'with her advantages.'

'My dear,' Mrs. Forde-Cusacke replied, with unusual determination, 'she does not wish to marry anybody; she wishes to marry Cecil Marlowe. He certainly is not a brilliant match for her; but he is quite unexceptionable—his family connections are good, and his prospects bright. We have seen him grow up from a boy. He is strongly attached to her; they have

similar tastes ; he is well fitted to make her happy. Besides, it is a love-match on both sides.'

'Love-matches are a mistake, my dear. They are all very well to amuse young people in the schoolroom with ; men and women require more solid foundations for matrimony.'

Mrs. Forde-Cusacke thought differently. Her marriage with 'that unfortunate young Brande' was a love-match, and left nothing but its termination to regret, and even that had been tempered by a mournful joy, for he died heroically in a gallant attempt to rescue a shipwrecked crew. The solid foundations upon which her present union was based gave her such dubious satisfaction, that, had she had time to think about it, she would have convicted herself of disloyalty. So, for the first time in her life, she steadily opposed her husband's wishes, and insisted upon the marriage necessary to her child's happiness. 'It is the only reparation I can make her,' she thought.

‘I believe you are half in love with Cecil yourself, mother,’ Cynthia said.

‘My dear child, I believe I am,’ her mother replied. ‘He is a good man, Cynthia, and very charming, and perfectly devoted to you.’

Whereupon Cynthia wept, and wondered why she did it.

‘Oh, mother, I wish I might stay with you all my life long!’ she cried.

So did her mother, for she loved her eldest child better than all the whole tribe of little Forde-Cusackes put together.

These young people were pervading the house as usual on the wedding-eve; and when Cecil and Mr. Forde-Cusacke came into the drawing-room, a detachment of them were investing Cynthia, whose charming face rose from a garland of curly heads grouped round her, some of them pressed against her, and all looking with interest at a piece of needlework, to which she was giving some finishing touches.

‘We *must* wait till she’s finished,’ a small

voice remonstrated at the third intimation that bedtime had arrived and the dustman was making his nocturnal rounds.

‘And what is this absorbing work?’ Cecil asked, when the small crowd at last dispersed, and he found himself by Cynthia’s side. ‘A doll? Oh!’

‘How rude of you!’ she laughed, as he stooped to pick up the figure of a Breton bride he had taken and then dropped as if it had burnt him. ‘Slighting my handiwork! and I thought I had done it so correctly from your description in the “Breton Sketches.”’

‘Perfectly—yes, beautifully done,’ he replied abstractedly. ‘Why, the nurseries must be overflowing with dolls! I was shown a whole regiment of smiling damsels just now.’

‘Oh, but this is not for *our* children!’ Cynthia replied, seriously regarding the doll’s fixed smile and glassy stare. ‘It is for that poor little Cécile of yours.’

‘Of mine?’

‘She is yours as far as she is anybody’s;

I think I never told you how glad I was that you asserted your right to maintain her as the discoverer of the poor mother's body. Do you know, Cecil, I am afraid there is something horrid in me.'

'I am not.'

'Because I was *glad* to be prevented from taking charge of her. I *didn't like* that child, that poor little piteous, motherless, desolate waif! Think of that—to dislike a helpless and harmless little child! It was atrocious.'

'Now I see the meaning of the doll,' he said.

The others had moved away to an ante-room filled with bridal gifts. The golden moonlight was stealing in a long bar through the partially curtained window, open to the balmy night.

'Let us go out,' he said, rising hastily and putting the curtain aside; 'it is warm and still.'

They stepped over the low sill, and, the curtain falling behind them, passed from the prose of fireside peace to the

poetry of moonlight romance, thrilling with the beauty of a moment that could never return, each with some far-off consciousness of the peril in which the morrow's rite was placing the loveliest, and often the briefest, feeling permitted to man. To-night each was in the other's eyes invested with such mysterious glamour as the mellow moonlight was casting upon the still foliage and dim masonry, on the wooded vistas and faintly-seen gardens, before them. Anything might be lurking in the dense sharp-cut shadows beneath the lindens; any colours might be upon those sleeping flowers; even the familiar face of the house, veiled in its shining magnolia leaves, with its late roses leaning out into the balmy air and breathing scents responsive to the mignonette and carnation odours in the shadows below, had a meaning and suggestion it would lose in the clear daylight. Fair and delightful the house and grounds would still be when the mysterious moonshine was gone, but how would frail human nature bear the searching light of noon?

Were such thoughts as these producing the sadness Cynthia saw, or imagined she saw, in Cecil's face, outlined clearly in the moon-rays against the background of shimmering magnolia, as he stood silent, looking away over the silvered woods to the glimmering down and sea, the rhythmic breaking of which on the distant shore was like the pulse of some deep and tranquil joy? There was no sadness in her face; she was content in the blissful silence. The wave of her happiness had rolled up to its full-crested height, whence it must fall, indeed, but in infinite varied curves of beauty, only to gather again in other forms. Her hand, pressed by his on his arm, was vibrated by the beating of his heart; the strong pulsations quickened her own and mingled with the soft beating of the moonlit surf, the quivering of the pale stars above, the tremble of moonlight on the waves, the expectant stillness of the motionless leaves, and all the magic of the warm flower-scented night.

A strain of music stole out through the

open window ; it was to Cynthia as though the house she loved as if it were a sentient thing had found a voice for its imprisoned soul. Her pretty home took on a new beauty ; majestic trees, distant fields and rolling downs, the very flowers on the sward, became more precious than before ; she valued her wealth now because to-morrow all would be his as well as hers. She felt her hand pressed closer and closer to the beating heart, whence came a long deep sigh.

‘Cynthia,’ he said at last, with a profound and penetrating glance upon her eloquent upturned face, ‘I want to tell you—I must tell you—something—something hidden—in the past.’

‘No,’ she replied, a sudden eclipse passing over her bright face, which she bent and finally hid against his arm. ‘No, oh no ! let it rest.’

‘*My* Cynthia—there must be no concealment between us. I ought to have told you before. I *must* tell you now.’

‘No, no !’ she repeated, trembling. ‘Do

not spoil to-night. Let the past go. I trust you—trust, trust, trust you !’

‘I am not worthy of that trust,’ he said in low, heart-smitten tones. ‘You do not know—cannot dream——’

‘Hush ! Let me be blind, Cecil—*my* Cecil !’

Each was now trembling as strongly as the other. Their heart-beats were confused in a common agitation and their quick sighing breaths audible in the stillness, which was no longer thrilled by music. Cecil remained silent for some moments, and then broke into such impassioned, half-articulate expressions as come only from the deeps of strongly stirred feeling. He spoke no more of the burden he carried in secret. Cynthia thought that she had never truly lived until that moment.

Five minutes later a quick step approached the open window, and Richard Marlowe, who had risen from table at Cottesloe and ridden hot-spur to Swanbourne upon some errand of urgent detail

that had been forgotten, lifted the curtain and looked out into the moonlight, which shone full upon the motionless figures of those lovers clasped in a silent embrace. A change came over Richard's debonair face. His eyes dilated; the curtain remained suspended in his suddenly arrested hand; then he let it fall gently, and turned back into the room.

'There is no one moving outside,' he said to Mrs. Forde-Cusacke, who was seeking the strayed pair.

Cecil could scarcely believe it was no dream when he stood next morning in the chancel among heaped flowers and broken sunrays of manifold hue, awaiting the bridal procession. After all, would she really come? What if she had by some occult means heard the truth? What if that rigid watch had at last ceased, and Renée, whom he knew to be still holding those severed links in the ground beneath the shadow of Cottesloe Church, should rise in spirit between them? What if he had told all in the moonlight — of that

little bottle and his grim suspicions—that he had virtually killed his young wife? Cynthia asked for blindness. What if that weird child should in some way make itself known? For Cynthia it was surely blessed to be blind. But would she never come? Suppose that she had died in the night. Renée had died suddenly. Was his brain going, as he had been warned it might, under strain?

The bride at last? No; Lady Susan, elate and charming, in pearl-gray satin. How well she walked; what dignity and elegance were combined in her still graceful figure, draped with soft, shimmering stuff; how the splendour of her dark eyes softened at sight of her son! And here was such a one; but no one, young or old, could equal his mother. So he reflected, with his sweet subtle smile and charming air. No woman present wondered that he should have won the pretty and charming heiress. Tall and manly, of a fine presence, with an indescribable suggestion of intellect in every

feature, infinite possibilities of romance and tenderness in his darkly-glowing eyes, he looked a fit choice for one who might choose among many.

Now at last appeared the severely-cut whiskers and compressed shaven lips of Mr. Forde-Cusacke, who walked slowly up the aisle through the thick crowd of villagers and guests with a fine air of authorizing and permitting Cynthia's grace and sweetness. Every curve of her charming pale face, as well as every fold of her shining raiment, seemed due to his magnanimity and large sense of condescension to others, while the very flower in his coat was a beneficence recently conceded to the weakness of mankind. Mr. Forde-Cusacke never appeared so truly himself as in a frock-coat and gray trousers ; top hats, white waistcoats, shining boots, and lavender gloves seemed to be invented expressly for him. Such functions as giving away richly-dowered brides and making speeches thereupon, must have been instituted chiefly to be performed by him.

Nor was the usual Forde-Cusacke infantry-guard absent from Cynthia's bridal train—girls as bride-maidens, boys as pages—while the latest contingent occupied a pew with nurses, and expressed their distaste for the proceedings in subdued, intermittent wails.

The filmy veil over Cynthia's face recalled the thin-spun drift upon Renée's, the dazzling folds of her dress the sunlit snow of Christmas morning. Such heavy scent as that of the white flowers in the bride's bouquet had perfumed his wife's death-chamber; it was an odour that always made Cecil a little faint. The crowded church swam; there was a buzz of meaningless words from the Bishop, the Archdeacon, the Canon and the Rector, music, congratulations, something written in a book. Then fresh air and sunshine, pealing bells, children scattering flowers, floods of white reflected light from the shining robes by his side, and these words repeating themselves in his brain, 'as long as ye both shall live.'

A great weight rolled off his breast, his eyes kindled, his step grew elate; the adamantine fetters which had bound him with such galling strength to the unloved, now bound him with welcome force for ever to the beloved.

His chest expanded, he walked with a firm, joyous step in the mellow sunshine; the slender hand, poised like a white bird on his arm, was trembling; there were starry drops on the bride's drooped eyelashes. When he handed her into the carriage, carefully gathering up her train and arranging its shining white folds over her feet, he seemed to be burying the old sorrow in them, as the snow buried Renée. Cynthia's passionate cry for blindness had removed his last scruple, her instinctive repugnance to the child exonerated him from much in the future; a page in life was closed for ever, and a fresh one, gold-margined, opened auspiciously; all was well.

It was small wonder that neither bride

nor bridegroom should see in the crowded churchyard, behind the rank of flower-children and spectators, a woman in a crushed crape bonnet, holding up a grave two-year-old girl with solemn black eyes, to look at the bridal procession. The child was fairly plump and well-conditioned; its broken words were English; it was clean and well dressed, yet with an indescribable air of belonging to the lower classes; its little arms firmly clasped a dirty and disreputable doll, in the costume of a Breton peasant.

‘Miss hev done well,’ pronounced the blacksmith, who had just left his forge and stood in his leather apron and small pushed-off cap, his bare arms crossed on the handle of his great hammer, which rested on the low wall; ‘she’ve a-took a personable man; holds up’s head and look’s like a man.’

‘A med well hold up’s head with she on’s earm,’ rejoined a waggoner whose business had been interrupted by the wedding procession.

‘Zhure enough, ’tis proper good stuff he’ve a-got on’s earm,’ said the smith.

‘I ’lows ’tes, William Giles, and a knows it; ’tes all Swanbourne lands and bags of goold sufferens into the baigain, a proper good heft for ’n to carr.’

‘Taint every chap is man enough to carr all that there,’ added a carpenter, who had come out of his shop in his paper cap and white apron, with his foot-rule showing from the pocket on his hip. ‘What’s a light ’ooman ’longside of what he’ve a-took with she?’

The smith turned and faced the carpenter with a sullen flame in his dark eyes. ‘If anybody wants to spake about a light ’ooman,’ he said very slowly, ‘let ’n come anighst me; and I’ll knack en down,’ he added—‘darned if I won’t knack en down!’

‘Darn it all, William Giles, I never meant no hearm,’ replied the carpenter; ‘there ain’t no call for ee to be so miffy. I never seen ar a ’ooman yet weighed haäf the heft of a vield or a house, let alone all they zay she’ve got. Not but what the ’oomen

be mostly light ; ter'ble poor stuff they be, thin as skim milk winter time.'

'Zhure enough,' added the waggoner, 'the better they be to look at the wuss they be to wear, like a vield o' carn vull o' poppies.'

'You can talk as long as you've got any wind left,' returned the smith ; 'but you knows vurry well your missus is the best part of ee, Job White. What that there new married man hev a-got on's earm is better than being the Queen's oldest son. He've a-got a proper good ooman to wife. I'd sooner be the poorest man in Swanbourne with the likes of she than the Emperor Napoleon with one o' the common zart.'

The Swanbourne bells chimed at intervals all that summer day, and the next day the fine Cottesloe chime rang out in honour of Bob Ryall and Mary Niblett, who walked arm - in - arm past Renée's grave—he in shining black, she in silken gray, and both blushing furiously. All Cottesloe was bidden to the wedding-feast

spread under the dark yew-tree outside Christopher Niblett's cottage, not excepting Ben Carter, who refused. But he came out to his door in his working clothes to look at the pair as they walked by.

‘It’s all vurry well to hev patience,’ he thought when he went back to his bench ; ‘but I’d sooner ev had Mayery.’

CHAPTER II.

THE DOLL'S ADVENTURES.

ESTHER BARNES'S cottage stood on the outskirts of the town by the riverside, its garden wicket opening on to the towing-path. A few apple-trees grew in the sloping sunny bit of garden, beneath one of which was a wooden bench, where Jim Barnes sat in shirt-sleeves on Sundays and summer evenings, smoking his short black pipe, and looking straight ahead at nothing in particular.

Barges often stopped near, while the bargemen looked in at the Three Jolly Watermen, a stone's-throw lower down, and many lighter craft were moored to

the bank at times for the same purpose, while there was constant traffic up and down the stream. Esther Barnes often congratulated herself upon the liveliness of the outlook. 'It heartens anybody up to know there's summat to look at,' she said, 'though 'tain't above once in a while I looks out, what with washing and Jim and the baby, let alone house-cleaning.'

This baby was unusually exacting on a certain sunshiny, windy day, and Jim was unable to conceive that a man's dinner might be delayed a moment for a baby's wail, so that Mrs. Barnes was sadly perplexed, and, as she afterwards said, 'didn't know how to turn round.' She was, therefore, glad to dispose of at least one responsibility by sending the little nurse-child out into the garden with the two great hunches of bread-and-butter that composed its dinner. 'She can't come to no hearn with the geäte shut,' she said, closing the door and returning to her frying-pan, with the crying baby in one hand and a

fork in the other, 'and they do say sunshine makes children grow.'

'What shall us do when mother goes?' asked Jim. 'Take the young un ourselves?'

'I'm willen,' replied Mrs. Barnes, between sputtering from the frying-pan and wails from the baby; 'tis a nice bit of money to hev coming in.'

'And no questions asked,' returned Jim, with a grim laugh. 'I'll war'nt Mr. Marlowe wouldn't grumble at funeral expenses.'

'I'll war'nt he'd sooner pay to keep the poor heart alive!' cried Mrs. Barnes indignantly. 'Folks may talk, but he hadn't no call to keep it if he hadn't a mind to. 'Tis a hard heart would grudge bite and sup to a motherless thing like that. But your mother ain't gone yet, Jim, and it's ill waiting for dead men's shoes.'

Out in the sunshiny garden the little child was contentedly munching its bread-and-butter, its bare arms and legs reddened by the keen east wind, its thick dark hair

showing bronze edges in the sunshine. Clapsed to its tiny breast was a disreputable Breton doll, pale from much kissing, with tangled wig, broken nose, and one arm lost, but more beloved than ever in its prime. It was offered every bite of bread-and-butter till all was gone, when it was bidden to say grace, and rewarded with kisses.

The child was too well accustomed to play alone on draughty doorsteps to mind the sharp wind ; it was a solemn, pensive little girl, independent and self-contained, accustomed to solitude, with large, intelligent eyes wide open to observe this interesting and unintelligible world, in which it had been barely three years. It sat on a stone beneath an apple-tree, crooning to its doll and absorbed in the contemplation of a fluttering brightness trembling on the mossy apple-trunk.

Flutter, flutter went the brightness, as the wind swayed the bare budded boughs, making the moss so vivid that the tiny child-hand grasped at its velvety green-

ness ; but vainly, for it found nothing but another fluttering glory on its little brown knuckles. How wonderful ! how perplexing ! Oh, that the brightness would stay and be her very own ! Now it was actually inside the little palm, the tiny fingers closed on the radiance with a croon of satisfaction, the little one tottered away with its treasure, unclosed the small fingers, and, lo ! it was gone. A piteous quiver of a small red mouth, an incipient wail, arrested by the sage reflection that there was none to hear and pity ; then a rapid interchange of subject and object, pity, that could not descend upon the baby heart, flowing out from it upon the doll.

‘ Pocr, poor Granpère ! pitty Granpère ! ’ warbled the child voice, between tender kisses pressed on the battered wax visage. Granpère must dance now to lighten his heart, the sunbeam was soon forgotten in the joy of dangling the limp legs in their torn *bragou-bras* on the path, and making the wax head waggle on one side of the body, which was suspended by its one

remaining arm. Then the little mistress danced, the graceful baby-dance of nature's own teaching, until she reached the wicket, through the bars of which the wonderful wide world, the shining sunlit water, and the mysterious moving houses or beds upon it could be seen. Perhaps she had some dim memory of some such moving house in which she abode awhile with a vague sweet figure called Maman, which had somehow floated away ; or it might have been some far-off thoughts of a greater, grayer water, all broken up into sliding, foamy ridges and hollows, that charmed the little maiden's attention to these smaller water-dwellings, and made her hold Granpère up to look, and babble a long, long story into his ears with her eager, bright eyes fixed on his vacuous, unchanging face.

Desire quickens intellect, the wished-for thing is more easy to compass than the unwished ; the need of getting through this gate made the little maiden remember Jim's easy passage through the same. He was used to put his hand on it and pull it to go

out, and push it to come in. The small grave face grew graver, the lips were pressed in a firm rosebud, the soft brow puckered, while the dimpled hand pulled and pulled in vain. The latch—ah, the latch! All was clear now : the small figure was stretched on tiptoe, the weak hand fumbled ineffectually, and at last successfully. The gate gave way so suddenly that the child's balance was upset and she fell backwards in a sitting position on the rough, hard gravel. But the little spirit was stout, the rising wail was swallowed down, the chubby figure was quickly on its feet again and out on the forbidden free side of the barrier with a cry of joy. The shining, tempting water drew her like a magnet ; her uncertain steps bore her to the brink, where she stood absorbed in contemplation, her small figure, in its white pinafore, crossover shawl, and velvet hat, doubled at her feet in the river.

What interest, what excitement was here ! An outrigger, rowed with long, swift strokes by a bare-armed crew, swept

by, the oar-blades flashing as they turned ; a heavier boat, with ladies in it, and a sail curved by the wind, passed more slowly ; a man sculled himself leisurely along with his dog sitting upright and solemn in the stern ; another dog dashed in from the bank after a stick ; here, under the side of a boat moored to the brink, danced rings of flashing silver as elusive as the glory on the mossed trunk : all this was painted vividly on the retina of the great velvety dark eyes gazing out of the little pale face. Granpère must walk on the water ; he was nothing loath ; he slipped in up to his knees and did not weep. Then a small foot was cautiously dipped in, but the result was unsatisfactory, for the river was cold, so the experiment was not repeated.

‘And what is your name, my little maiden?’ asked a benign gentleman in black, meeting her lower down the river side.

‘Cicely.’

‘Cicely what? What is your sur name?’

A puzzled look, half scornful, half bored, on the small face.

‘What is mother’s name, then, eh?’

‘Rennie’—a name unfamiliar to her interlocutor, who knew names of many people living thereabouts.

‘Little Cicely Rennie out all alone? Hum! Does Cicely know what to do with sweeties? Ah! I thought so.’

The good man was vexed to find so small a thing wandering by itself, and looked vainly about for some guardian.

‘Are you going home?’ he asked, when she turned away, munching the sweets.

‘Ess,’ with a tired and rather cross air.

‘And where do you live, my little dear?’

‘In the ’ky,’ she replied, with the imperturbable gravity of an infantile hoaxer.

‘In the sky? No, no. Cicely lives in a house. Come now, Cicely, where does mother live?’

‘In the ’ky,’ with a sigh of deep but resigned boredom.

‘But where does little Cicely live? Come, now.’

‘In the ’ky.’

Obstinate as Wordsworth's little maiden, but less communicative, the small damsel, with an impish delight in her interlocutor's perplexity lurking beneath the gravity of her mysterious eyes, kept to her point and vouchsafed no further information whatever, so that the good man, who had an appointment to keep, and knew that there were children at the Three Jolly Watermen and the adjacent cottages, looked at his watch, and, reflecting that the children of the poor manage to tumble up somehow among horses' feet, on river banks and railway lines, left her to her fate, which he earnestly trusted would be a good one, and Cicely trotted on, crooning, but unsmiling, her small round face as inscrutable as that of a sphinx.

Just then it occurred to Granpère to misconduct himself in some occult fashion, so that he had to be chastised with a severity that drove the sawdust from his

already shrunken body. His vicarious wails upon this were so piteous that he had to be comforted and kissed and finally hushed to sleep, the hushing process reacting upon his little nurse, whose deep-fringed eyelids began to close and her small body to sway as she sat on the bare ground. The approach of a horse along the towing-path aroused the instinct of self-preservation; she got up, and, lo! straight before her was the cosiest house floating on the water, with its roof at the bottom instead of the top, as she knew was the way of water-houses.

A little climb, just practicable for legs so small and so unsteady, landed her on the barge, which was waiting for its occupants, who were at present refreshing themselves at the Three Jolly Watermen. On the barge a charming nest, lined with sacks, was soon spied out and taken possession of, and in three minutes Cicely and Grandpère were curled up, sheltered from the wind and fast asleep, well tired with the walk, the wind and sun, and the crowd

of interesting sights and adventures. Half an hour later the bargeman and his wife came aboard, the former stupidly drunk, the latter drowsily tipsy, and the barge went on its way down the stream.

When Cicely awoke an hour later and crept from her nest, there was so much to see on the river and its banks, the gliding motion was so delightful, and Granpère was so deeply interested in the explanations she babbled in a low voice to his attentive ears, that she kept still and attracted no attention, until an inward monitor told her it was tea-time, when she set out on a foraging expedition. Encountering her hostess, who was now in the maudlin and affectionate stage of tipsiness, she calmly demanded 'Cicely's tea.' A large plum-cake, a red-herring, and some water furnished this meal, which was accompanied by senseless gabble and tipsy tears and kisses from the woman, and followed by inarticulate jovialities from the man, whose hopeless attempts to keep himself on his legs furnished his small guest with tranquil diver-

sion until he became quarrelsome and began to beat his wife, when the child slipped away like a frightened kitten and hid among the sacks, where she cried in subdued whimpers till she fell asleep.

Next morning her appearance amongst them caused her host and hostess, both of whom were sober, and diligently poling the barge along, the utmost wonderment, for they had totally forgotten the events of the previous evening. Beyond her name and the intelligence that she lived with 'Dsim and Esser and the baby,' nothing, could be got out of her, except broken demands for 'beffkas' and subdued crying.

The woman was for keeping her on the barge till an opportunity came for sending her up the stream, from the banks of which it was obvious she must have come. But the man would not hear of it; 'no squallers aboard' for him, he growled, and when half an hour later they passed a little town, Cicely, furnished with a piece of cake to keep her quiet, was put ashore and bidden walk up a road leading to the

principal street. 'And there you'll find your mother, my dear,' were their parting words, which Cicely implicitly believed. In this hope her little tottering feet bore her some distance along, through the town and away from the river, until her attention, variously diverted on the way, was attracted and riveted by the sight of a cat playing with her kittens in the sunshine at the open door of a little house in a row, such as artisans occupy on the outskirts of country towns, each house furnished with a small wicket in a small paling, which fenced a narrow strip of flower-border from the road.

Nothing could be more charming and graceful than the gyrations of that lovely cat; she leapt and rolled and ran in the sunshine, hung head downwards from the porch trellis, or sat washing her paws with an air of profound abstraction, apparently unconscious that her negligently waving tail was being fiercely assaulted and maltreated by three madly merry kittens, who all fled in comic simulated panic when her

placid face was turned towards them with some tranquil remark in the feline mother-tongue. Then it was too funny to see the three little roguish whiskered faces peep cautiously from beneath the plants sheltering them, and draw back again in pretended terror, until, the small bodies venturing boldly forth, there was whisking of little tails, bounding of little lithe bodies, and all kinds of pretty, merry pranks and gambols over the prostrate rolling body of the mother.

Cicely's grave face relaxed as she gazed through the gate, she even uttered a small chuckle; Granpère was forgotten, though he sadly needed care, having inadvertently taken a bath without the precaution of first removing his clothes. But the merriest madcaps tire at last, and each little cat's head drooped in turn, each little body fell limp in graceful sleep, the small limbs arrested in the very act of some gambol, while the sagacious mother cat, after contentedly surveying the family repose through placidly winking eyes, stretched

her own graceful limbs in the sunshine and herself slept the sleep of conscious rectitude.

Then an exposition of sleep fell also upon the little child at the gate, who gradually sank in a heap in the warm sunshine on the gravel path by the paling, where she was discovered by the master of the house on coming home from the workshop to dinner at noon.

He could obtain no further account of herself from the little waif, beyond her name and the facts that she wanted her dinner and lived with 'Dsim, Esser, and the baby,' with some babble about a house in the water and a mother in the 'ky.' He took her in; his wife washed and combed her and gave her her dinner. This she took with philosophic calm, while her hosts discussed her probable origin, and took stock of her clothing, which was good and new, and much better than that worn by poor people's children. On removing the crossover shawl, they observed a black and silver necklace on the little neck, ter-

minating inside the bosom of the frock in a crucifix of the same.

‘That’ll come handy for to know her by,’ her new friend said ; ‘so soon as I’ve done dinner I’ll go to the police-station and describe her. Them she belongs to’ll soon find her by them beads. She come out of the town, that’s where she pointed when ast. Her father lives that way, or t’other side by the river, you may lay what you like.’

‘She says she come out of the water, and is going to the sky, poor little heart!’ added the wife ; ‘what can anybody make of that? I expect she’s a orphan. Where do your father live, my dear?’

‘In the ’ky.’

‘There now! hark to that. If I didn’t say as much. The father’s dead.’

But Cicely’s father was at that very moment at Swanbourne, where he was spending Easter. He was strolling beneath the budding lindens with his sweet young wife, discussing this plan and that project, while the throstle sang, the

fragrance of spring flowers and opening leaves filled the sunny air, and the pink linden boughs, starred with translucent green, waved softly overhead and showed plaques of pure blue sky between. Cynthia made some remark and looked at him with gay defiance. He smiled back again, and his smile, always subtle and usually sweet, was tempered by deep tenderness and full of assured happiness. Some such merry strife as people with perfect confidence and affection for each other wage between themselves was going on, and Cynthia was getting the best of it, to judge by the mixture of daring and triumph in her face.

‘This time last year——’ he began.

‘This time last year you had nothing to do with it,’ she interrupted.

‘Quite so ; I was unmarried, ungoverned, free as air.’

‘And oh the difference!’ she broke in with sudden passion, the accumulated bliss of those months of married life rushing over her like a flood. ‘*My* Cecil! I never lived till now.’

He was intoxicated with a happiness of which he dared not pause to think ; life had become a fairy dream, in which there was as yet neither looking before nor after. Orestes, delivered by his sister from unwilling blood-guilt, and no longer pursued by the Furies, was not more disburthened from care than Cecil, once married. Renée's face, in its perpetual frozen vigilance, now rose no more between them ; the thought that his unkindness had sent her to a self-sought death was suffered to torture him no more ; the fear of discovery was laid to sleep, consciousness of a secret withheld from Cynthia extinguished by the perfect trust and absolute freedom of intercourse reigning between them. The child was in good hands, well cared for ; there was no occasion to see it too often, for it showed no liking for him, but rather a shy shrinking from his presence. He had suffered severely, almost to the oversetting of reason ; he was now healed and happy.

CHAPTER III.

CYNTHIA'S PERIL.

THE blissful days flew by on golden wings for these married lovers. They brought the summer assizes, and with them a brief parting. But it is not easy to part those whose hearts beat in unison ; each of these lovers was able to put the thoughts and events of the day into brief and readable narrative ; thus each continued to lead the other's life, and their pleasant intercourse received a new charm.

Cecil's reputation was steadily growing, and he received many briefs ; his powers increased with his new happiness ; his great work was taking shape rapidly in his brain, though he had not yet written a line ; life was at full tide ; capacities of brain and

heart rose together to meridian splendour ; he was surprised at the amount and brilliance of the work he got through with ease and pleasure.

One evening, towards the end of the assizes, he had a leisure hour before dining at the Bar mess, which he devoted to re-reading and answering Cynthia's last letter. She was a more brilliant letter-writer than he ; a light touch, a sparkling allusiveness, a knack of weaving trivial incidents into bright narrative, investing the commonest things with interest, and spicing the whole with wit—all were hers. He read the dainty sheets with great mental refreshment ; it recorded the day's doings, described some dull people she had met, some duller books she had read, spoke of the pleasure of seeing him again soon, and finished with some appreciative comments on his own recent experiences and thoughts—nothing more, yet every line was stamped with her own peculiar charm, and seemed to her husband the spiritual reflex of her outward beauty.

He wrote what was in his mind in return, and then dressed quickly and wrote some more in the odd minutes his quickness had gained, scolding her for some doings he thought beyond her strength, and advising her to be more careful in future. Some quaint remark in her letter had amused him greatly ; he laughed over it on his way to dinner ; it rose in his mind during the evening, which was hilarious, and included the trial of a member for the crime of matrimony, and consequent infliction of a fine upon the delinquent. The sitting was nearly ended, a pungent observation from a learned brother, followed by a happy retort from Cecil, had set the table in a roar ; he was smiling his sweet subtle smile, and thinking how the evening's fun could be retailed for Cynthia's refecton, when a telegram was put in his hand. He read it, turned pale, and left the room.

A bolt had fallen from heaven upon his new-blossomed happiness : Cynthia was dangerously ill—he would have to make haste if he would see her alive.

While eagerly studying time-tables and considering what route would bring him most quickly to Swanbourne, he had the curious conviction that he had expected this and known it from the first. This strong love had been a disloyalty to his first wife, a sin against sacred duty. For Cynthia's sake he had broken his first wife's heart—sent her to an early and probably wilful death—and disowned his own little motherless child. And now Cynthia was to be taken from him—Cynthia whom he ought never to have loved, and who should never have been his.

It was an eternity of blank misery before he could start, another eternity was passed in travelling; he seemed to have been travelling all his life in the wild and vain hope of reaching Cynthia, whom he might never more see; ages ago, in some other life, she had loved him and been his wife. He was conscious of this and of nothing else, and changed his train at the proper stations, by a blind instinct, noticing nothing and no one.

The last change had been made and the summer's day was far advanced, when a fellow-traveller alone in the carriage with him offered him the morning paper he had read. It was a strange thing to Cecil that he had once been interested in daily papers, had even been excited about a contest for a certain borough, now at its height. His candidate, who was also his friend, being the Willoughby who had entertained him at Cherbourg on board his yacht, had been returned by a triumphant majority, so this fellow-traveller regretfully told him; for he was on the opposite side. Then Cecil heard himself talking of this election in a far-off way, as if he had been someone else, telling off the recent Conservative gains and losses, like a dead man speaking of what was going on over his grave. This topic exhausted, his fellow-traveller spoke of trains and stations, and dates of arrival, and seemed very anxious not to be delayed.

‘You are in a hurry?’ Cecil asked, in a dull, heavy voice.

‘ Well, yes ; I have been telegraphed for to a bad case. One has to go ; but from the symptoms I am fairly sure I shall be too late.’

‘ Really ? a medical man ?’

‘ My name is Sims—Parker Sims,’ with an air as if to say, ‘ The great Sir Parker Sims, the specialist, of European renown, is not to be called into the country for nothing.’

‘ How sad !’ he commented listlessly.

‘ Particularly sad. A young creature with everything to make life happy. Fine, healthy young woman—I have met her in society—a very charming girl, an heiress, and not long married. Married to rather a clever fellow—quite a love-match, I am told—a rising barrister. There was a romantic story about her father, a Brande, of Swanbourne. By the way, you may even know poor young Mrs. Marlowe ?’

‘ I am her husband.’

There was a long, gloomy silence, broken only at the last station, where

a carriage from Swanbourne was waiting for both with the intelligence that the lady still lived.

Cecil half pushed Sir Parker into the carriage and sprang in immediately after him. 'Drive fast!' he said to the coachman.

'While there is life there is hope,' said Sir Parker, after they had gone some miles. 'And we have youth on our side, Mr. Marlowe—a mighty ally.'

'Yes,' he sighed; 'she is young—so young!'

He was permitted to stand for a moment by Cynthia's bed, which was surrounded by nurses and doctors and poor Mrs. Forde-Cusacke, red-eyed and worn. Cynthia seemed scarcely conscious of his presence, and he left the room in despair, his mouth scorched by the touch of her burning lips.

He went out in the beautiful late-summer morning, and paced restlessly up and down beneath the lindens, his face directed to the open window of the

room in which she lay. He knew well how the sunbeams came stealing in through that window in the fresh mornings, heralded by the songs and chirpings of many birds, how stars peeped in at night and moonbeams slanted through the rose-sprays and magnolia bordering the window. And now Cynthia lay there dying.

Here, on the terrace beneath that window, in the moonlight, on the eve of their marriage, she had uttered that passionate cry : ‘ I trust, trust, trust you ! ’ and asked for the blindness he was too willing to give. Here, too, in the fresh spring sunshine, she had spoken of their married happiness, and pitied her unmarried self. ‘ I never really lived till now ! ’ he seemed to hear, in the low, sweet voice, vibrating with heart-felt love. And she was dying in the beautiful summer day.

Yonder, on the sea-girdled down, he first saw her as a grown woman, when he bounded so suddenly into her dreams on that sweet May day. He could never

forget the beautiful eyes, full of dream and mystery, and overflowing with light, or how his heart leapt at the sight of them ; he remembered even the fresh white dress and the may-blossom in the belt. And there, too, by that sunny blue sea, he first knew how deeply he loved her, and feared, actually feared, that she loved him in return. He tried—yes, he tried hard to subdue that passion, and he paid no court to her until he could honourably do so. Who could foresee that the grave would open and give up its dead ? And now she was dying in her bloom, before the first glamour had faded from their married happiness.

Bees were humming placidly in the flowers—her flowers ; roses unfolded deep, sweet hearts to the sun ; myrtles spread their milky bloom, spice-scented, round the window of the room in which her life was ebbing in strenuous agony ; a butterfly flitted in through the casement and out again into the sunlight, as the sweet soul must soon. The thick laurels glowing in

strong light, the sward sweeping away in stretches of sun and shade, the gardens and orchards, the distant fields and the pleasant house with its open windows—all were hers, and all seemed to ask for her in their dumb fashion. Must she leave this sweet home, see that blue, blue sky and hear the soft whisper of that calm sea no more? It was too hard. He prayed, as people pray from those inner depths of the heart that are sounded only in mortal anguish: ‘Spare her, and let it fall upon me!’

He wandered into the house in his restlessness; her letters lay unopened on a table in the hall, his own, written the night before, centuries before, it seemed, among them. He listened outside the door, but there were sounds which tore his heart asunder and drove him out again into the free air. Why would they not let him stay with her? Yet he knew that he could not have borne it, and that he would do no good by the sympathy she was beyond heeding.

Some work lay on the table in her favourite room opening on the garden ; there were piled the books she had lately been reading ; she had been very careful in her choice of books during the last few months, because of her theory, at which he affected to smile, that what she read would bias the mind of their child. Tears, the first he had shed on that day of sorrow, came scalding to his eyes, when he thought that this little child, so long desired, might now never be. Servants came and went, the women crying, the men downcast ; Rob Ryall, with his surliest face, followed him about with small attentions.

‘It was that damned dog!’ were the sole and uncomprehended words Bob uttered to his master’s unheeding ears.

A gardener was working stolidly in the new flower-beds ; near him were a lady’s gardening gloves and tools.

‘Why are those things left about, Winter?’ he asked irritably.

‘I hadn’t the heart,’ the man replied.
‘It was the last thing she did, sir. She

was set,' he added after a time—'she was terrible set, poor missie ! on getting these beds straight against you came home. She was always such a one for flowers.'

The man had held her as a baby in his arms, had loved her—Cecil well knew—as his own child, and yet he felt an unreasoning hatred of him for speaking of her as already gone. He began to picture himself without her, the mere husk of his former self, a body emptied of its soul, passing benumbed through life, aimless, hopeless, joyless, moved by a sort of blind mechanism. No, no ! the thing was inconceivable ; Cynthia must not, should not die ; he could and would not have it. Even his mother had no comfort for him. When he saw her he looked wistfully in the face that had all his life long brought him consolation, but read there only the dull anguish he knew must be in his own.

'Mother, mother !' he cried when they met, and his voice had as piteous a tone, and his face had as piteous a look, as the voice and face of his little daughter when

she lost the sunbeam shut in her hand, and had no one to comfort her.

‘My poor child!’ she replied.

‘It was an accident,’ she added, after a long silence; ‘she was startled.’ Then she went on to tell him how the barking of a dog had frightened the ponies of some visitors just leaving the house, how the ponies had run away, upsetting the groom at their heads and throwing a child who was just getting into the carriage; and how Cynthia had sprung after and caught the ponies’ heads, and stopped them.

‘I thought her so well guarded,’ he complained. ‘How could her mother let her do such a thing?’

Presently Mr. Forde-Cusacke arrived, bringing Marmaduke, for whom his sister had asked in the morning.

Cecil received the new-comers with due care for their comfort and refreshment, and listened with a sympathetic smile to Mr. Forde-Cusacke’s grumblings over iniquitous railway arrangements. He was even sorry for Marmie, who was frightened

out of his wits and on the verge of tears, repressed only by a boy's pride, and he remembered that Cynthia had once said, 'If the Judgment Day came to-morrow, papa would grumble at having to put off some meeting, and threaten to write to the *Times* about it.' Then he had a ghastly foreboding of the kind of face Mr. Forde-Cusacke would wear at the funeral, and he seemed to hear him uttering pompous platitudes upon the 'mournful event.'

'It can't last much longer,' he heard one of the doctors (that young Dr. Clayton, who had stirred Cynthia to rebellion about the insanitary cottages) saying in a low voice to another as he softly left the sick-room. Cecil turned heart-struck away, and thought of her as he had last seen her, waving good-bye to him at the railway-station. She had wished to go in with him and see him into his train, but he would not suffer her to do so lest she might be jostled or pushed—he was so careful of her. He had turned before entering the station for a last look at the

bright sweet face smiling at him in its healthy bloom, with a strange sadness at his heart, as if foreboding that it would be the last smile.

While he was wandering aimlessly in the corridor, restless and miserable, a low sound issuing from a closed room near him pierced to the centre of his heart, and touched the fatherly fibre latent in the heart of every wholesome-natured man, but which had never before been reached in his. It was the feeble wail of the child whose birth had recently been announced to his scarcely-heeding ears. He opened the door softly, and, going in, found the puniest of girl babes, fretting in a nurse's arms, half forgotten and unconsidered by the rest of the household.

‘Poor little thing!’ he said, taking it in his arms and looking at the smallest human face he had ever seen, with a thrill of deepest compassion for the frail life once so much desired and now so unwelcome. The feeble wail hushed, the eyelids closed as he held it close and warm, and a new

and strong passion sprang up in his heart. This little baby was now the most precious thing the world held for him ; Cynthia's life and his happiness had been given for it, Cynthia's nature and his own were mingled in it—it was all his own, utterly dependent upon him, *his own child*.

‘Will it live?’ he asked, ready to give his life three times over for the frail creature, too early launched upon the troublous waves of this stormy life. Its father watched the practically motherless child with strained anxiety ; he hung upon its looks, its breathing, its unconscious infantile movements, as if the fate of the world trembled upon that feeble existence. He hushed it in his arms, marvelling at its extreme smallness and delicacy ; he sang softly to it, fancied that it knew him, and was exultant because its feeble fitful wail was stilled more quickly and surely in his arms than in those of any other.

The unconscious mother battled through the day, though at times it was difficult to detect any sign of life in her ; and then,

towards midnight, the young doctor came out of her room, radiant. 'Sir Parker and the others may say what they like,' he whispered; 'they don't know what reserves of vitality she has.'

'Do you think,' Cecil faltered, and then his voice, steady and calm all day, suddenly broke, and tears rushed to his eyes.

'I think she may pull through,' he replied triumphantly; 'she has nothing against her, no worry, no mental distress, a good constitution—everything to make her wish to live—every possible attention and friends at hand. Yes, I *think* she may pull through.'

Which, to the intense surprise of Sir Parker (who never forgave her), the boundless astonishment of the other doctors, and unmeasured triumph and delight of Dr. Clayton, she did, though she lay many days between life and death.

One night her husband, who was now often allowed to be with her, thought she was gone, she slept so quietly and with so

faint a pulse—it was just at the turn of the darkness on the chill gray point of dawn. In his anguish he threw himself by the bed, and prayed for her life, using almost the same words and gestures as Renée had used by his bedside in his hour of extremity, and suddenly remembering that scene and his own weak wonder and child-like comfort in her devotion to him. Just then Cynthia drew a deeper breath, unclosed her beautiful eyes upon his agonized face, which was distinct in the soft shaded light, and smiled; then, murmuring brokenly of heavenly visions and floating angels, slept again.

The darkness had turned, day was breaking; the chirping and twittering of many birds sounded faintly from house-eaves and tree-tops; the sleeper's breath was deeper, her pulse stronger; he knew that she was given back to him, 'like Alcestis, from the grave.'

END OF VOL. II.



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